

July, July by Iris Violetta

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Summary: Eleven adjusts to her new life, in her new family (now a life-spanning collection of oneshots)

1. July, July

I.

Eleven shows up suddenly that next July, huddled in the woods next to Hopper's box, hoping he'll come back soon. She's not sure how she got here, her memory of everything is hazy at best, but she recognizes the spot. He'll come back soon, she just knows it. And he still scares her a little, but maybe he'll bring her to Mike or Joyce. Somewhere safe.

Later that day, with the shadows of the trees growing longer, there finally comes the faint crunching of twigs under boots. Hopper's not quite paying attention, thoughts lingering on the day's events, but then he rounds the bend and sees her. She's curled up, dirt everywhere, wearing the same pink dress but stained and torn. Her hair is a little longer but he knows those eyes. They're wide and wary and tired. He only lets his shock last a moment before he launches back into sheriff form and coaxes her into letting him carry her back to the truck. She's exhausted enough that she doesn't fight and he tells her that they'll go right to Joyce. She'll know what to do.

Joyce turns her head as she hears the door creak open and is about to greet Hopper when she sees the bundle in his arms.

"Is that –"

"Yeah. I found her in the woods – she was practically asleep. Hasn't said a word."

"Here, bring her to the couch."

He gently sets her down and El turns her head toward Joyce, eyes brightening just a bit. The older woman is thinking of running a bath, of where she has clean pajamas, but upon seeing her eyes pulls the girl into her lap. She cradles her softly, stroking her head and murmuring words she's mostly used for Will these past months.

"Oh sweetie – you're ok. You're safe. You're safe. I won't let anything happen. You're safe. Oh my brave girl! You found us didn't you? We'll

keep you safe," she whispers and El curls her fingers into Joyce's shirt. It's a half hour before she can get the girl in the bath and then fresh clothes. Hopper makes her macaroni and cheese – if there's ever a moment for comfort food, it's now. After wolfing it down, she finally speaks.

"Mike?"

Joyce immediately calls the Wheeler house and gets Nancy, who tells the boys that they all need to go to Will's house, right away. Will is scared for his mom at first, but the other three each have a small hope that they'll find their lost friend there. No one dares share that hope aloud. The bike ride over is quick but silent.

Meanwhile, it's decided that Eleven will stay with the Byers, Joyce adamant that she "cannot let that little girl go another day without a real home." She and Hopper are discussing the details when they hear hurried footsteps on the porch. The door bangs open to reveal Will, who runs to his mom, and Mike, who freezes in the doorway because he can't believe the sight before him. This girl on the couch, this girl whose face has become gaunt and hair has started to grow, but has the same eyes he sees in his sleep. Lucas is trying to push him forward and Dustin is yelling from the back, "What's going on? Go already!"

Mike stumbles forward as the other two run right over to the couch to embrace El. Joyce and Hopper quickly stand, worried that they're scaring her, but she has a small smile when the boys release her. They're asking question after question, directing them to El, Joyce, Hopper, anyone.

"Where were you?"

"How did you get back?"

"Did you kill any more monsters?"

"What happened?"

Joyce starts to explain everything to them, while Mike finally edges toward Eleven until he's sitting next to her. She only has to whisper

his name and he's hugging her tightly, tears prickling his eyes because even though he believed she was out there, even though he kept the blanket fort and spent months screaming into the replacement Heathkit and walking the perimeter of the Hawkins Lab property and checking his compass every morning, he was so scared he wouldn't find her. She's clutching him back, nose pressed into his neck and eyes scrunched shut, and it's not until the chatter dies down that they disengage. Will is hesitantly standing before them, waiting to be properly introduced.

II.

Nancy brings over boxes of old clothes for Eleven to pick through. El gravitates toward the soft colors and fabrics – pink sweaters and grey leggings and pale dresses. Mike gives her his blue sweatshirt, the one she originally wore, thinking it might comfort her (she sleeps in it every night). Her hair could almost be a stylish pixie now, except for the stubborn cowlick in the back.

She gets cold easily, as if she was never warm enough. She loves thick socks and wrapping herself in blankets in the living room and Mike's basement. Nancy notices and gets her leg warmers, pink of course. She insists that they're really fashionable. The boys tease El about them but she loves them and always wears them around the house.

They move Will into Jonathan's room, and put bunk beds in there, which Will thinks is awesome. Jonathan feels better knowing that his brother is just above him at night, even though it's been months since he returned. Hank takes to sleeping next to El's bed, having quickly grown attached to the girl. Will gives her his walkie-talkie, with an intuition that she might need it more than him. They live too far out for it to reach the other boys' homes, but on nights where she wakes up in a panic, heart racing worse than ever, she'll give the connection an extra push and whisper for Mike. He keeps his in his bed while he sleeps and always wakes up when she calls.

"Did you have a nightmare?"

"Yes."

He'll tell her she's ok and remind her that Joyce is just down the hall (and usually so is Hopper). And if she really needs him, he always says, he'll hop on his bike right now. Then he'll try to think of random things, something to explain to her, get her mind off the scary dream.

"Do you know what a Happy Meal is?"

"Did I tell you about trick-or-treating?"

"Have you ever seen snow?"

And he'll ramble until her heart slows back down to match the thumping of Hank's tail next to the bed.

III.

Eleven doesn't go to school with the boys. They figure out she's at a second grade reading level, with holes here and there. She had very few books back then, back in the before. Joyce patches together an education from old workbooks and extra copies of Mr. Clarke's lessons and the set of encyclopedias at the Wheeler house. She especially loves learning new words and keeps a battered copy of Webster's Dictionary by her bed. And even though it's for babies, she learns a lot from Sesame Street.

Still, she sometimes wishes she could be with her friends during the schooldays. Mike comes home with Will every day, until El starts meeting them in the field behind the school on nice days, often anxious to share the new words she's learned or ask a science question. But mostly she's just happy to be surrounded by them as they jabber on about their day.

The boys are quick to give her their own version of an education, explaining the long and tangled mythology of Batman and the X-Men and the Flash, just to name a few. They hold their breath during the first *Star Wars* viewing, but are relieved when she loves it and wants to rewind the tape and rewatch immediately. El and Lucas start up "shooting practice" with his wrist rocket. She lifts cans and toys for him to aim at, moving them a little quicker each round. He swears up a storm, but loves the challenge. Dustin tries and fails miserably,

much to Lucas' delight.

Mike looks at her sometimes like he's trying to commit her to memory, as if she could disappear again at any second. They hold hands sometimes when they walk or when they all squeeze together on his couch to watch movies. But it's a long time before they kiss again.

IV.

She gets her first period six months in, finally at a healthy weight. Luckily it's the middle of a school day and only Joyce is home. El is in the bathroom, feeling a little ill, when she sees the blood and realizes it's coming from her. She starts to panic and calls for Joyce,

"Bad. Bad. Blood."

The fear has her reverting to single words instead of sentences. All she can see is the red and feels like it's dripping from her ears, from mice, from the eyes of the bad men. Joyce barges in, expecting a deep cut or gash, and almost laughs in relief once she realizes what's going on.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. I never had to do this with the boys, I just didn't think about it."

Joyce helps her clean up and explains everything. "The same thing happens to me. It happens to Nancy. It'll happen to baby Holly someday. It's normal and healthy."

El spends the rest of the day curled up on the couch and the boys are told that she's just under the weather. Somehow she understands that this is only for girls, and doesn't bring it up to her friends.

V.

Eleven is the first to know, the first to detect. When Joyce brushes by her in the kitchen, when she holds her on the couch... there's something different there. Something new, an extra humming in the air. El keeps it secret, but Joyce notices the look in the girl's eyes and wonders...maybe...maybe she knows.

Three months in, after everyone knows, the family sits around the table after dinner, Hopper having officially moved in at last. They're talking about the new baby and taking guesses at the sex. Will thinks it's a girl, because what are the odds of having a third boy? Jonathan agrees and they look at El next to hear her guess.

"It's a boy"

Jonathan chuckles and Will leans forward to ask, "Wanna take a bet?"

"I know."

She says it so seriously that everyone pauses, realizing that she probably does know. Then Joyce smiles, her eyes crinkling, and laughs, "Well good, because you're the only girl for me."

Hopper smiles, secretly happy because he isn't sure he can do another baby girl.

VI.

They let Eleven pick her birthday, and she chooses April 11, because Mike told her that's when everything starts to grow again after the long cold winter.

The first birthday they throw her is the most magical. The boys take her on a scavenger hunt around town where she finds trinkets and candy and even a special drawing from Will. He's drawn the whole group as their D&D personas, but added El with a cape, because he still thinks of her as a superhero. No one is exactly sure of her age (although Joyce and Hopper can guess) so they put just one candle in the center of the cake. Nancy brings over pink and white streamers and they decorate the dining room and make a crown for the birthday girl to wear.

Joyce gives her a fluffy blanket and Nancy gives her an array of chapsticks in all different scents, because "you never know when you might need them." Jonathan gives her a framed photo, one he took months ago when no one was looking. In it, the kids are all running in the leaves, Dustin throwing up a whole handful. El is laughing like she's never known unhappiness.

Hopper gives her a bike, her very own with a headlight and even a basket, which he tells her is for her snacks. When he first tells Joyce about the idea, he adds that he's not too keen on El always riding with Mike on his bicycle. Joyce lightly reprimands him with a smack, but secretly is delighted by such a fatherly instinct. She thinks of the little one who's soon to come and knows he'll always be looked after.

The kids run around the yard with sparklers after, Hank chasing and barking. El stares at the lights with glee and Will tells her all about the big fireworks she'll see on the 4th of July. When Will goes inside to the bathroom, and Dustin and Lucas are on the other end of the yard using their sparklers as lightsabers, Mike stands next to El as her sparkler dies down.

"It's pretty."

"Yeah. El? Did you have a good birthday?"

She nods enthusiastically and goes in for a hug, but his mouth meets hers on the way. It's quick like the first time, but softer and she knows to kiss back. Mike's glad it's too dark for the others to see his blush when they wander back over.

VII.

Brian James Hopper is born on July 26, 1985, a year to the day after Eleven's return.

The kids are at the movie theater, seeing *Back to the Future* for the second time. It's all they've talked about for the past weeks, ever since they originally went. Mike and Lucas debate the fact that the DeLorean seems to travel through both time and space, Dustin wonders if Eleven could somehow use her powers to time travel, El is fascinated by the 50s setting and Will harbors a secret crush on Michael J. Fox. They're sitting in the last row and Dustin keeps mumbling to himself in awe until Lucas throws popcorn at him to shut up. Mike holds Eleven's hand, because he knows that sometimes the volume in the theater overwhelms her. And because he uses any excuse to hold her hand. Will stares wide-eyed at the screen, but is interrupted by Jonathan sneaking in to grab his shoulder. It's time. They have to go to the hospital.

It's a long day of waiting and Mike, Lucas and Dustin are called home to their families. Eventually Hopper comes out to announce that it's happened, he's here, their brother is here. He's sweaty and his hair is a mess, but El can feel the happiness radiating out of him. It bounces around her and she's tempted to reach her hand out to grab it.

It's another wait before they're allowed into the room, where Joyce is propped up in bed with a tiny mewling bundle in her arms. It doesn't escape her that a year ago she was holding Eleven this way on the couch. Hopper stands next to the bed, unable to take his eyes off the baby. Will runs right up to take a look and Jonathan has a flashback of being very young but seeing Will for the first time.

El hangs back by the door. She's never seen a real baby this close before and is worried she'll do something wrong. But Joyce beckons her closer and Hopper picks her up to sit next to Joyce on the bed. She carefully shows El how to place her arms and then gently places Brian in them. He'd cried for Will, cried for Jonathan, but immediately calms with her. It's been scary day for him, suddenly out in the air and light, but right here he feels warm and safe.

The end of summer will come soon with all its changes – the boys will start high school, Nancy will cross the country for college, Jonathan will move in with Steve (of all people) and work two jobs saving for school, Will won't be able to keep his problem a secret much longer – but in this moment, Eleven has never been calmer.

2. What Is Wrong With You?

Will manages to keep his illness a secret for almost two years. It helps that the attacks are few and far between and anything that happens at night he can play off as just a nightmare. Any strangeness that his family and friends notice is chalked up to him having gone through a traumatic event. Even Eleven, who can smell the Upside Down on him, believes that it just stuck on him after spending a full week there. Until the day she catches him throwing up a slug into the leaves behind Castle Byers. Maybe if it were anyone else, he could have hid it. But she can feel that clammy, oppressive aura from yards away and that's what draws her over. And once she's there she realizes that this has been happening all along.

She doesn't have to say anything for him to start begging for her to keep this between them.

"Please don't tell anyone, El. Please. It's fine, I have it under control."

"Will, you can't hide this. It's...it's bad. It isn't safe."

"It's fine, I'll figure it out. Just please, *please* don't tell anyone."

"Friends don't lie," she insists, and even though it sometimes sounds silly, she will hold on to this fact forever. Her life is split into the before and the after, and this was her first commandment of the after.

"But friends also keep secrets. And, El, you're not just my friend, you're my sister now, ok? You're family. Please, please, I need you to keep this a secret." There's desperation in his eyes and she is torn.

"Dustin and Lucas?"

"No, they can't know."

"Even..." she trails off, because it goes against everything she's learned in her life, her life in the after.

"Even Mike." His voice is resolute and she can tell there's no arguing about this. So she bites her tongue and nods and hopes she's making him feel better.

Now that she's aware of the situation, she becomes hypersensitive to it. She can sense his attacks coming, almost before he does, and is always ready with a towel or a comforting head scratch or an excuse to give the others. She feels terrible inside about keeping this secret, but is too scared to defy his wishes and tries to make up for it by helping him as much as possible. And for several months it continues this way.

But one day is worse than the others. One day Will won't stop vomiting slugs until he passes out. El panics, she can't wake him up. No one else is home and she doesn't know what to do. Hank is barking and whining and she pushes him outside and finally grabs the walkie talkie in desperation and calls for Mike. She's pushing the connection harder than ever and doesn't even bother to wipe the blood streaming from her nose.

"El? What's wrong?" The fear in his voice is evident – she never uses the walkie in the daytime and she certainly never screams.

"Will. It's bad. Mike, he won't wake up. It's bad. I'm sorry. Sorry." She's sitting on the bathroom floor next to Will's unconscious body, trying to keep the tears back. Mike assures her that he's on his bike, he's on his way, he'll be there soon. He calls for the other boys to come too, and gets Dustin who promises to follow.

By the time Mike arrives, Will still isn't responsive. And by the time Dustin stomps in, Mike still hasn't gotten the full story out of El. All he knows is that it's bad and that it seems to scare the girl more than a regular cold or flu. The boys pull Will out of the bathroom and that's when Dustin notices a stray slug worming its way along the bathroom wall.

"Uh, guys, what is THAT?" He's never seen a slug like this before and knows something's up.

"I don't know, Dustin, a slug?" Mike's starting to panic and is resorting to sarcasm.

"Have you ever seen a slug like that before? Use your head!"

"Why are we even arguing about this?" They bicker back and forth for

a while before El gathers the courage to interrupt.

"The Upside Down," she whispers. Both boys whip their heads to look at her.

"What'd you say?"

"The Upside Down."

Dustin starts furiously pacing the hall, and Mike just stares at her. He knows something's not right here. She looks almost...guilty.

"How long has this been going on?" he slowly asks and she hangs her head to avoid his eyes.

"The whole time."

"How long have you known?"

"October," she whispers, full of shame.

"Are you serious? El, that's like six months!" He's yelling now and Dustin stops pacing to stare at them.

She's focusing her eyes on the floor and can't think of anything to say. But he steps closer and she can feel his anger.

"Why would you keep that a secret? Don't you understand how dangerous this is? What is wrong with you?" And suddenly she's 12 again, desperately trying to keep her new friends safe but doing it all wrong, because everything about her is wrong. This is the place she goes when she's sad, when she feels overwhelmed by her differences and a world that she doesn't always understand. She will always be that girl, she will never be normal, why can't she just be normal, what is wrong with her? And that was the last time he ever really yelled at her, the last time he ever made her feel less than human.

Her eyes are wide and it's harder to find words than ever. She backs away and then quickly flees the house, because she can't be here, she can't be here, she doesn't belong here. How dare she fool herself into thinking she's one of them.

As the screen door slams shut, Dustin looks at Mike. "That was pretty cold, man."

Mike ignores him, heart already sinking because he knows what he did but he's too stubborn to admit it yet. All he can think about is that this means it never really ended, did it? The Upside Down never really left. And it terrifies him because it means that none of them are safe, it could take Will again, it could take El... Here he thought everything was fine and back to normal, but he's stupid, he's so, so stupid. On the couch behind him, Will's eyes are finally opening and Dustin is in the bathroom gathering the courage to squash the slug.

Later that day, after the parents return and it's discussed whether Will should see a doctor or not and the boys are sent home, Hopper goes looking for Eleven. He finds her sitting on the old box in the woods, looking like her sweater could swallow her up. Her face is ashen and her hair, usually perfect due to her proud, twice-daily brushings, is lying tangled on her shoulders. She's too afraid to look him in the eye, so he silently sits next to her and puts an arm around her shoulders. Once his shirt is soaked with tears and she's finally calmed down, he says, "Let's go home." He hopes she understands that it's her home too.

3. Lessons in Basketball

In November of 1985, the boys go on their freshman field trip. It's an all-weekend camping trip about an hour outside of Hawkins. Mike isn't looking forward to spending a whole weekend with people like Troy and James, and Will makes sure to pack extra tissues in case of an attack. But Dustin and Lucas get so excited over the girls that will be there that the other two agree it will be fun at least to watch them crash and burn.

Eleven, of course, doesn't go. It's the first weekend she's ever spent without any of the boys and she doesn't know what to do with herself. Luckily, Joyce knew this would happen and called Jonathan earlier in the week.

"Why don't you have your sister over for dinner? She's going to be lonely without the boys. Lord knows she spends enough time with me and the baby already." She loves using those words - sister and daughter. Jonathan agreed and that's how Eleven finds herself sitting on the counter in his kitchen that Friday night. Well, his and Steve's kitchen.

She's only been over a few times, but she likes the relaxed and boyish atmosphere. Here she's allowed to sit on the counter or eat dinner on the couch. Jonathan is making spaghetti and they're both bobbing their heads to the mixtape he has playing. El is looking through a few catalogs that came in that day's mail and then picks up two postcards, each with a photo of Stanford on the front. But before she turns them over, they're plucked from her hands.

"Whoa kid, ever heard of privacy?" Steve is standing before her, trying, and failing, to look stern.

"Ever heard of a brush?" She fires back, said in deadpan because she still doesn't have a full grasp on how to sound sarcastic.

"Oh shit! Byers, what have you been teaching her? Besides this terrible music."

"Steve, it's not my fault you have no taste."

"Wow, it's just a hate-on-Steve party in here, isn't it?" He says in mock-offense as he leans on the door jamb and crosses his arms. "So, kid, how's life? You missing little Wheeler already?"

She primly ignores him and goes back to the catalog.

"You and Byers are exactly alike, you barely say anything," he scoffs.

"Please, I wish I was as pretty as her," Jonathan says as he strains the pasta. El's ears turn red and she keeps staring at the catalog but can't keep the smile off her face. Steve might be annoying sometimes, but she can hear the affection in his voice when he talks to Jonathan, when he talks to Nancy.

Ten minutes later they're parked in front of the television with bowls of spaghetti, Jonathan and El on the couch and Steve lying on the floor in front of them. The latter is flipping through channels until he finds what he's looking for - the basketball game.

"El, you've watched basketball before, right?"

She shakes her head. Neither Jonathan nor Will are interested in sports and Hopper tends to watch football. Steve, his mouth full of pasta, points to the screen and starts to explain.

"Ok, so these are the Pacers, the ones wearing blue. They're from Indiana so we like them. And those are the Lakers, they're from California. We don't like them."

"Nancy's in California," she reminds him.

"Exactly, so she's the enemy now," he states seriously but there's a glint in his eye. He gives her a quick rundown of the rules.

"They're not very good," she comments as she watches them miss basket after basket.

"Well, OK, yeah, but we still like them because we're loyal."

They continue to watch the game, Jonathan and Eleven silent, Steve shouting and moaning every few minutes. El thinks basketball is ok, but quickly figures out a much better game.

Whenever the Pacers look like they're about to make a free throw or actually get the ball back, she grabs hold of the tv reception, making the screen freeze and sputter. With each twitch of the picture, Steve yells louder and louder, even getting up to hit the tv a few times. He knows full well about El's powers, but it doesn't occur to him that the poor reception is due to anything but a bad antennae.

Jonathan is trying to keep his face neutral, only smiling a bit when he softly tells her that she better not be getting any blood on his couch. She subtly holds up a tissue, one of many stuffed in her pockets.

By the end of the game, Steve is just full-on groaning, somehow lying on the couch between them with his legs thrown over the back and watching the television upside-down. Eleven decides she doesn't miss the boys so much after all.

They get back Sunday afternoon, sweaty and smelly and yawning. It turns out Troy mostly left them alone, but Dustin had farted loudly while trying to talk to Kelly Gibbs, and the other boys still haven't stopped teasing him. Will asks El if her weekend was okay without them. She just nods and smiles.

4. RIP Mike Wheeler

The first time Hopper catches them kissing, Mike almost wets himself. They're going on 16 (or so) and the chaste kisses have turned a bit hungrier. They're changing too. He's become long and lanky and she, while willowy as ever, has grown soft in certain places (not that Mike would know for sure – he would never touch her like that...not unless she asked him to...which he wonders if she will).

The boys have been lazing around the Byers/Hopper home all day, playing Atari and discussing plans for the next campaign and teasing Lucas about his crush on the new girl, Tara. Brian has been tucked away into bed and Joyce starts to chase them out, because it's a school night after all. They drag their feet out to their bikes, grumbling about Sundays, and Eleven follows to say goodbye. Will stays inside and Dustin and Lucas silently agree with a look to get a head start home.

El has finally, after weeks of games, beaten Mike in Atari and can't keep the smirk off her face. He crosses his arms and turns to face her.

"Oh, what is that look for?"

She shrugs and pretends to examine the ends of her hair, now a few inches past her shoulders. Over the years, El's learned to tease and joke like her friends, just in her own quiet way.

"Come on, you're not gonna be a sore winner are you?"

Her smirk widens and she takes a step backward, innocently placing her arms behind her back. He rolls his eyes and matches her step forward.

"I mean, I think you won on a technicality."

Step.

"Dustin was distracting me."

Step.

"Don't look at me like that."

Step.

"You think you're so cute, don't you?"

Step.

And then she's against the wall and he's lowered his head to hers and his hair is brushing her forehead. She's more confident now than in the beginning and easily lifts her chin up and they're kissing and kissing and kissing. Mike feels a telltale twitch, which he makes sure to keep from her, and El just knows it makes her feel warm inside. She's curling her fingers around the collar of his shirt when they're suddenly enveloped in a blinding light.

Hopper is standing on the porch, police flashlight held high, and definitely notices Mike's hands splayed on the wall on each side of her head before he jumps away in fright. Mike is stuttering, unable to get real words out, and all Hopper has to do is raise his eyebrow for the boy to quickly squeak out a goodbye and leave on his bike.

El looks up at Hopper, her face both innocent and defiant, before walking nonchalantly into the house. The chief sighs to himself, rubbing his brow and thinking that he is still not ready for this.

Mike is furiously pedaling, heart still racing, when he sees Dustin and Lucas up at the corner, waiting for him. They look at him with overly sweet expressions as he slows to a stop.

"Oh, *Michael*, didn't expect you to catch up so soon," Dustin says, but then notices his friend's expression. "Wait, you look like the Demogorgon chased you here."

"Worse," Mike pants, trying to catch his breath. Dustin furrows his eyebrows and Lucas cocks his head to the side. What could be worse than the Demogorgon?

"The chief." That. That is definitely worse.

"Oh shit Wheeler, you're a dead man," Lucas gasps as Dustin tries to hide his giggles behind his hand.

"So, uh, can I have your Spider-Man collection after you die?"

"Mm, I want to take over as Dungeon Master!"

"No way, Lucas, you know I would be so much better!"

"Well I'm taking his copy of Indiana Jones."

"Do you think Jennifer Hayes will cry at your funeral?"

Mike doesn't say a word as the other two continue their banter the rest of the ride home.

5. Summertime

I.

Summertime. The very word will always conjure up the summer of '85 in her mind. Her first whole summer to be a normal kid. Summer is bare feet on grass, it's playing D&D under a tent outside. It's long, lazy days where the sun wants to stay up with you. It's lying in the hammock with Will in the afternoons, reading Nancy Drew and Boxcar Children. It's the freckles that dapple Mike's cheeks.

II.

Lucas turns 14 in June and finally gets the telescope he's been wanting. All of the boys like science, but while the others might prefer AV or chemistry, he is fascinated by space.

After the sun finally goes down and they've stuffed themselves with cake, they set it up in the backyard. They each take turns, sharing what they see (Dustin sees the neighbor girl standing in her bedroom, earning him a swift smack from Mike). Eleven takes the most turns, wanting to see more and more, never content. Lucas stands by her every time, proudly explaining each thing, excited by her own excitement.

The other boys lie down in the grass one by one, the energy of the day and the digestion of the cake getting to them. Eventually even Lucas and El tire and join them.

Lucas points out a few constellations and Will claims that one looks like the Thessalhydra. Dustin claims one looks like the neighbor girl.

"What do you see, El?" Mike asks.

She's seen the stars before, but this is the first time she's really looked at them. A few years ago the whole universe was in a laboratory. Now it's vaster than she can even fathom. The sheer enormity of it overwhelms her, and all she can get out is a whispered "pretty." The boys don't say anything, but Mike moves his hand over to interlace their fingers and Lucas softly pats her arm.

III.

Summer is the taste of a cherry Popsicle while listening to the boys' game, closing her eyes and letting their voices wash over her, so different from the steely silence of the lab. It's Nancy pulling out her box of nail polish, because "this is the first time I've seen your bare toes since last year." It's Hopper teaching her to play poker for M&M's and Will complaining that he's the only one without a good poker face.

IV.

The baby cries a lot. Joyce assures Eleven that this is normal and it's the only way he can speak right now. But that doesn't mean it's not loud.

She and Will escape to Castle Byers, where he draws ideas for the next campaign and she dozes next to him. The quiet is bliss. But she can feel a certain sadness coming from Will.

"Will? What's wrong?"

He doesn't respond for a long time and she closes her eyes again. When he does speak, it's in a small, shy voice.

"Hop's a pretty good dad, isn't he? With the baby?"

"Yes," she answers, turning her head to him. He's fiddling with a crayon and looking off in space.

"I bet he'll always be a good dad." El senses that there's more coming and waits. She's nothing if not patient.

"My dad...well, he's a pretty bad one." He scrunches his nose and hunches his shoulders and wishes he hadn't said anything. El has heard whispers of Lonnie and this seems to fit in. Will looks little and sad, the way she felt in the lab, the way she still feels sometimes.

"Papa," she whispers and then louder, "I had a papa. He was a bad man."

Will nods but keeps his eyes down. She watches him twirl the crayon

with his fingers before speaking again.

"Hop keeps your drawings."

"What?"

"In his desk. At work." She declines to mention just how she knows what's in the police chief's desk drawers. Will softly smiles and the crayon stills.

"Cool. I bet he'll keep yours too."

He goes back to drawing and she goes back to dozing and they never talk about their old dads again.

V.

Summer is sitting on a blanket, full of hot dogs and chips, watching fireworks light up the sky. It's laughing as Dustin manages to get her to dance to Tina Turner, even though she can never match his moves. It's Joyce waddling around the house, heavily pregnant and sweaty, and Hopper constantly trying to get her to sit down. It's drinking straight from the hose and letting the water dribble everywhere.

VI.

Nancy leaves for Stanford on a Thursday, the entire Wheeler clan piling into the station wagon to take her. Mike whines about going, but El knows he's going to miss his sister when she's gone.

Eleven and Dustin stop by to see them off and Mike, very aware of Ted's eyes on them, simply gives an awkward wave before hopping in the car. Dustin immediately suggests getting ice cream after, because what else would one do at 10 on a summer morning?

Dustin gets a double scoop of both rocky road and mint chocolate chip. El gets a single strawberry scoop, which he says "is pretty boring, but hey, do what you want."

"I always do," she softly responds and that gets a laugh out of him. They sit on the wall outside the shop, dangling their legs and enjoying their treats in comfortable silence.

"Dustin?"

"Nmph?" His mouth full of ice cream.

"What's a babe? Is it like a baby?"

"Uh, what are we talking about?"

"You said that girl is a 'total babe'. Yesterday, with Lucas."

"Oh, that. It means she's really hot."

"Hot. Like pretty?"

"Yeah, but it's different."

"How?"

"I dunno, it just is! You just...you know it when you see it." He waves his hands uncomfortably because he is not about to get into this topic with El.

She nods seriously, thinking that she'll need to look for it. Dustin sighs next to her.

"It doesn't matter anyway, she'd never like me."

"Like a friend? Or..."

"Like anything. Girls like that, they don't like guys like me."

El stares at him as he goes back to his ice cream. How could anyone not like him? Her friend, who makes them all laugh, who has always been amazed by her, who is so smart, who built a bathtub! This is a time when she wishes she were better with words, that they would gracefully fall from her mouth and make him understand how much she values him.

Instead she asks him to tell her the story of the time Troy chugged a gallon of milk at recess on a dare, even though she's heard it four times. It never fails to cheer him up.

VII.

Summer is lying in the blanket fort the night after school ends, trading whispers with Mike while the other boys snore away. It's bike rides home from the store, basket freshly filled with candy. It's the daisies growing off of Mirkwood that she picks for Joyce, that Nancy teaches her how to make daisy chains with. Someday she'll get married with daisies in her hair and they'll remind her of this summer.

6. One By One

I.

Jonathan is the first to leave that summer of '89, finally heading to NYU after years of working and saving. Nancy is also going to New York, having been accepted into the medical school at Columbia. And Steve is...well, no one really knows what he's doing but apparently he's tagging along.

The Byers and the Wheelers have a joint going-away party at the latter's house the night before they take off, simple hor d'oeuvres and champagne for those over 21. By the end of the evening Ted is asleep in the Lazy-Boy, Karen and Joyce are giggling over baby stories of their oldest kids and Hopper is watching Brian chase poor Holly around the house.

The kids have retreated to the basement where Steve lies on the couch with a serious buzz and Jonathan sits on the steps taking a few shots of everyone chatting. Dustin and Lucas are there, of course, plates heavily filled with snacks. Mike tells the story of when he and Steve caught each other sneaking in/out and everyone laughs, mostly at Steve. Nancy smiles, thinking to herself how naive she had been that night, how she had no idea what was to come. She looks around the room and realizes that they are all there, all eight of them. She briefly thinks of Barb, the only one to not make it through, her heart clenching. El looks at her, seeming to read her mind, and gives her the tiniest of smiles.

II.

Dustin is next, leaving for Caltech in early August for a pre-orientation workshop. They have a celebratory last D&D game, one of the grandest they've done, spanning 19 hours. Even Eleven is involved, brought in for guest parts. Mike promises to have the sequel ready for Christmas.

They sleep in the basement that night, all huddled close together, enjoying even the sound of each other's breathing. El asks them to tell the story of how they all met, knowing most of the details but

never hearing it all together.

"Well my mom knew Mike's mom so she would bring me over there to play with him and..."

"In first grade, Mike and Lucas were playing tag around the playground and ran into me and knocked me over. And then..."

"I moved here at the beginning of fourth grade and decided I would take pity on these losers and eat lunch with them. So I..."

"We went out to the woods looking for Will and found you instead."

III.

Lucas departs a week later, trekking up to the University of Chicago. They have one last night with the stars and Mrs. Sinclair makes them her special devil's food cake.

"Now, El, you better come and visit me because it's going to be so quiet here without the boys."

El beams; she's the favorite of all her friends' parents. The boys roll their eyes because it's not like El isn't quiet herself.

They lie on the grass and dig through old memories, allowing themselves to be sentimental.

"Remember when we made up that scavenger hunt for Eleven?"

"Remember in fifth grade when you had the biggest crush on Ms. Finley?"

"Remember when you would wear a camouflage bandana?"

"Remember when Dustin farted?"

"Which time?"

"Exactly."

IV.

Joyce, Hopper and Brian take Will up to Indiana University the last week of August. Eleven is allowed to stay behind because Mike won't leave for Ann Arbor until the next day. She, Mike and Will watch all three Star Wars together the day before, soaking up these last moments of being at ease in each other's company.

Joyce is already weepy at breakfast and goes on and on about how proud she is of her boy. Will pretends to be embarrassed but secretly loves it. All he's ever wanted to do was make her happy, ever since he was a toddler watching Lonnie make her cry. Hopper simply makes comments about traffic and packing logistics, hoping to balance out Joyce's emotions. El makes silly faces at Brian while she cuts up his sausage.

When the time comes for them to depart, Will hugs her tightly, telling how much he'll miss her. Joyce can barely keep it together, so she gets right into the car, and El gives Brian five kisses before he's convinced to get in as well. Hopper gives her a hard stare and tells her to be good. She smiles sweetly back.

Later, when she's in her room, she finds a drawing from Will, a beautiful portrait of her, with "my sister" written on the back. She has to be careful not to get her tears on it.

V.

Mike leaves the next morning, his parents turning a blind eye to the fact that he never came home last night. He's supposed to stop home and load up the rest of his things, but he's leaning outside the car, dawdling, still not quite ready. Eleven stands before him, eyes roaming his face, his hair, trying to memorize every detail, every freckle.

"I'll call you every day. And if you ever have nightmares, call me. I'm serious, I don't care what time it is, you call me."

She nods and promises to write as well.

Her hair tumbles down her back nowadays and she's pulled it into a loose braid. He fingers the end of it softly, too overwhelmed to look her in the eye, thinking of the little girl with the shaved head.

"I'll come back. I'll come back like you did." His voice no more than a whisper, any louder and it will crack.

They both know it's a bit silly for them to be so distraught over parting for college, but this will be the longest they've been apart since El burst into infinite molecules in front of Mike's eyes. And neither of them has ever forgotten that period, the long dark days in another world, the sheer hysteria of trying to find her.

And even though it's been a long time, maybe years, since they've said it, she whispers, "Promise?"

He swallows hard and shakily smiles, eyes darting up to hers. "Promise."

He gets into the car and drives away and she watches until he's gone. Then she turns to walk back inside. She's alone now, the only one to stay behind. She knew this was coming and she made the choice, but it doesn't make it any easier.

Then she hears tires on the gravel and turns in confusion to see Mike already flying out of the car. She only has time to widen her eyes before he's lifting her in his arms, clutching her close and kissing her like it could be the last time. She quickly gets over her surprise and grasps his head and puts all of her feelings into the kiss, because it doesn't matter how much they kissed last night, or how much they kissed this morning, this...this is everything. After a few moments their lips separate and he leans his forehead against hers and closes his eyes, saving this memory for the lonely days ahead. Then he gently sets her back down and she looks at him with a question in her eyes but a smile on her lips.

"I promised," he says with a little shrug and her smile widens even further.

"Okay, but I do really need to go now."

7. The Byers Girl

I.

The town isn't sure what to think of Eleven at first, this girl who sprouted up out of nowhere. There are plenty of rumors - some say she's a distant relative of Joyce or a runaway caught by the police or even Hopper's illegitimate daughter from another relationship. They wonder why she's homeschooled - adults think maybe she's developmentally challenged, kids have heard whispers and think she's a witch. But this being Hawkins, no one has the audacity to ask Hopper or Joyce, and the two play it off as "she's come to live with us" and nothing more. As time passes, town grows used to her until she's just the Byers girl, always so sweet and polite.

For years they keep her close to home, too nervous about the government swooping back in, hoping that if they keep it quiet maybe she'll be left alone. Karen Wheeler pitches in, inviting El over for treats and sometimes to babysit Holly for pocket money. Having learned most of the story from '83, she is eager to help the girl who saved her son multiple times. El finds her soft and calming, the Wheeler house a picture-perfect oasis. Ted has somehow not realized that this is the (probably Russian) girl from the FBI photo and Karen is just fine keeping it that way.

II.

Mr. Clarke is let into the circle and knows her past, but they keep her powers a secret even from him. Joyce and Hopper decide it's necessary to get an actual teacher involved in her education, and Mr. Clarke readily accepts. He's excited by the challenge. She turns out to be extremely bright, devouring books and math sheets and science experiments. And she's the only student of his who never complains about having homework.

Sometimes she wishes she could go to high school like the boys, but she is secretly terrified. She unfurls from her cocoon slowly, and even at 15 isn't ready for the crowds and social pressures of school. And she is never able to set foot in the middle school again, too filled with bloody memories. After a few failed attempts, like when Mike tries to

bring her to AV club and she starts hyperventilating at the door, she goes no further than the parking lot. She cries when she realizes she won't be able to go to the Snow Ball, not in the same room where she lay in the pool and saw Barb's corpse. Mike assures her that she's not really breaking the promise and that he'd much rather have a fake Snow Ball in his basement anyway ("then we don't have to watch Troy try to dance").

The boys are all a little obsessed with her and never want her to feel left out. They invite her to study sessions even if she's working on different topics, and include her in any group activities outside of the classroom. She meets some of the friends they make in their clubs and science classes, people the boys have deemed worthy of her. Dustin and Lucas always ask for her approval on the girls they like.

III.

In 1989 she's given the greatest gift of all - a legal identity. Elle Byers Hopper is printed on paperwork, on a Social Security card, on an ID that she holds in her trembling hands. She's real, she's whole, she exists. She's not quite sure how Hopper pulls it off, but she knows he's behind it. She isn't sure what to say, but knows he doesn't need words, so she simply hugs him tightly and hopes he understands how much this means to her. Mike insists that she was always real.

She befriends the head librarian over the years and eventually, when everyone is off to college and she's considered a legal citizen, she starts working at the library. She likes the quiet and the order and the research, but her favorite part is the children. They grow to love her because she looks them in the eyes, listens to them and speaks the way she would to an adult. And she sneaks them candy. She learns what projects they're doing in school and what books they like and soon "Miss El, Miss El!" can be heard every afternoon.

On days when Joyce is working, El picks up Brian from school and brings him back until closing. He becomes the little prince of the library, knowing all the good spots and getting spoiled by the employees.

"Ellie, did you pick out books for me?"

"Of course, B. Let's see what we've got today..."

Sometimes Mike calls her there between his classes and she always says, "Michael, I'm very busy," which is a grown-up thing to say. But of course she always stays on the line, relishing the sound of his voice. She'll absentmindedly twirl the phone cord with one finger and to anyone in the room she looks like a normal teen talking to her boyfriend.

8. 3 AM

January 1990

Mike has become a light sleeper over the past few years so he grabs the phone on the second ring, noting 3:22 glowing on his alarm clock.

Bruce, his roommate, doesn't budge thanks to the earplugs Mike got him after the first couple of midnight calls.

"El?"

"Mike." Barely a whisper and he can hear the tears in it.

"What was it about?"

She hesitates before whispering "Papa."

Mike has a flash of the man's face and his blood begins to boil. He hates that she still refers to him as Papa, hates that this man stole her childhood and haunts her to this day. There's a reason she's never called Joyce and Hopper anything but their names. His hands on her face that night in the school, telling her she was sick, and her reaching for Mike...his stomach turns to knots. He sees the man in his own nightmares; he can't imagine hers.

But none of this would help her right now, so he pushes these thoughts back and softly says,

"It's ok, you're ok. He's gone, he can't get you. Is Hank there? He'll snuggle with you for me. Hey, you wanna hear a story about the dining hall tonight?"

He's always been a gifted storyteller and he can hear the distraction calming her, her breaths returning to normal.

"Are you still gonna visit me next month?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Cool, I'm so excited. I bet you look really pretty right now."

"Mike," she reprimands. That's a good sign, her sense of humor is back.

"I love you, ok? Try to go back to sleep."

"I love you too"

He gently hangs up the phone and throws himself back on his pillow. Her nightmares haven't been too bad this year, maybe 2-3 a month. A definite improvement from twice a week when he was in 8th grade. But now he's so far away. He wishes he could be there now, to fold her up in his arms and know that she's safe.

In his darker moments he dwells on the few details Eleven's given him about her life in the lab. He pictures her sparse, cold room and imagines her being dragged to a dark chamber for punishment. He can almost hear a child's screams echoing in his ears. It's good that the man is long gone, but sometimes Mike wishes he could meet him again, make him suffer like she did, punch that face until there's nothing left. How dare he, how dare he...

The moonlight hits his wall and he looks at the photograph pinned there, a candid of her laughing (at Dustin). He would do anything, anything, for this girl.

9. Ellie & B

I.

Brian, the baby, her brother, who looks at her like she's an angel and holds onto her fingers and has never known the destruction she's capable of...

II.

June 1986

Brian has been pulling himself up for weeks and toddling around with support for days, but he hasn't quite taken the plunge into full-fledged walking. Eleven and Joyce are sitting on the floor in the living room one sunny afternoon, watching him hold onto the coffee table. He's looking at them, only a few feet away, but it's miles for him. He just has to get there...

He takes a couple tentative steps and then lets go of the table, balancing for a moment before falling on his bottom. Except he doesn't land, he freezes in midair, seated a few inches above the carpet.

"El, sweetie, don't help him. He's got to figure it out on his own."

"But.." She wrinkles her eyebrows. What if he hurts himself? Joyce seems to read her mind.

"It's hard, I know. That's the hardest thing you have to do for your kids, letting them figure out the world for themselves. Like how I let Will go outside at all after what happened. You'll see, someday, when you have little ones of your own."

Neither one knows that the years of testing and X-rays and radiation have destroyed the girl's ability to ever have children. El nods and turns back to Brian, who's pulled himself up again and is reaching for her. She puts out her hand but makes sure not to use any powers this time. Slowly, wobbly, he takes the three steps from the coffee table to her hand and she grabs him before he topples over. She's smiling and Joyce claps her hands, complimenting her littlest son on his feat.

"See that? He'll learn."

III.

"EllieEllieEllieEllieEllie," he chants as he races around the house, his toddler legs barely able to keep up with his endless energy...

IV.

April 1993

Brian asks to join tee-ball that year, a surprise to Joyce after 3 unathletic kids. But they sign him up and take him to practices and games. Hopper gets him a glove and plays catch with him in the yard. Unfortunately, just like his siblings, he's pretty terrible at it. But he loves it, and they love watching him smile.

One Saturday afternoon, Joyce, Hopper and Eleven sit in a row on the bleachers at the local baseball field, watching Brian's game. His team is losing but not by too much. When it's his turn at bat, he swings several times, missing the ball entirely (even though it's on a tee). When he finally gets it, another player quickly grabs it and he's out. But he's smiling and his family still cheers.

Their team loses the game and after the obligatory handshakes, the team stands right by the bleachers waiting for their coach. One of the boys, with auburn hair and a nasty face, loudly says, "Well, we all know who's fault it is. Baby Brian - can't even hit the tee."

Brian's face drops and he looks confused as the rest of the team snickers. The redhead laughs the loudest and turns around, but promptly trips on his shoelaces and falls on his face. Funny, because his shoes were tied just a moment ago...

"Eleven!" Joyce sharply whispers, narrowing her eyes at the girl next to her. El puts on her best wide-eyed innocent look.

Hopper is glaring down at the boy and gruffly says, "That was just a coincidence." But when Joyce isn't looking, he softly bumps El's shoulder with his own and gives her a conspiratorial smirk. "Good girl."

V.

Brian loves his family - his understanding mom, his brave dad, his cool and artistic brothers. But it's his sister that he shares his secrets with...

VI.

November 2001

Eleven wakes up at midnight to the phone ringing on the nightstand. It's a strange time nowadays, towers falling and tensions running high, and a call in the middle of the night doesn't seem like a good sign.

"Hello?" She answers, keeping her voice low.

"Ellie?"

"B?" She sits up and clutches the phone closer. "Are you ok?"

"...I'm in jail."

"What?"

"...in Bloomington."

"What?"

"I know, I know, I'll tell you later but can you please come get me? Please?"

"I'm in Chicago. That's a four hour drive. Joyce and Hop are just two towns over. Why don't you-"

"No! You think I'm gonna call Dad...the chief of police...from jail?"

She sighs, knowing that it would be best for Hop to find out at home instead of over the phone. "Ok. I'll be there by 4."

"Thanks, Ellie. I mean it."

Taking only enough time to pull up her hair, throw on jeans and scribble a hasty note, she's on the road, going at a steady 85 mph. She builds a bubble around the car, keeping away any cops. She

manages to get to the Bloomington station just past 3. Inside it's nearly silent, a lone officer sitting bored at the desk.

"I'm here for Brian Hopper. I'm his sister," she tells him and he lazily replies, "Wait here."

She sits on a plastic chair, nervously fiddling with her thin wedding band. Then the officer returns with Brian in tow, looking tired and sheepish and sad all at once. She doesn't say a word, just hugs him tightly before finishing the paperwork and ushering him to the car. As they leave the city limits, she finally speaks.

"Vandalism?"

"It's stupid. I just... these guys, they're really great and they actually like me and.."

"Brian-"

"You don't get it," he interrupts, sullenly slouching further down in the seat. "You and Will and Jonathan...you're all so cool and interesting. You're nothing like me."

She tries so hard to keep from smiling but fails. "Oh, B... You forget how much younger you are than us. By the time you were in kindergarten, we were practically adults. Believe me, none of us were cool. We had our own share of bullies." The quarry flashes in her mind, a pang in her heart.

Brian huffs and looks out the window, because he's sixteen and that's his response for most things. She continues the drive in silence. When they pull up to the house, all the lights are on, Joyce and Hopper clearly up and waiting for their son. Brian groans and drops his face into his hands.

"I'll come in with you. But you need to do the talking," she tells him, squeezing his shoulder as they walk up to the door.

VII.

The old man slowly approaches the podium, as if afraid, before looking out at the seats. It's a sea of black, all the way to the back of the room.

"My sister, she was...otherworldly." He's normally a stoic man, built like his late father, and the crowd is surprised by how easily he crumbles into tears. He shakes his head, signifying that he can't continue, and returns to his seat.

10. Casserole Night at the Wheelers'

August 1984

Eleven has been back for two weeks when Karen Wheeler insists she comes over for dinner. Mike has been spending every spare minute at the Byers house, and his mom would like to see him just once. But more importantly, she's interested in properly meeting this little girl who has completely captured her son. And who, according to Joyce and Chief Hopper, saved the whole town.

Karen calls Joyce to ask, wanting to make sure that Eleven will feel comfortable, and the other woman is delighted. Joyce in no way regrets the decision to take in El, but she's worried about how it will all go. Karen's enthusiasm makes her feel much better.

Eleven is nervous, but Mike is so excited that it calms her. Nancy comes over before to help pick out an outfit, putting her in a soft grey dress and pink headband. El looks at herself in the mirror, pushing at her still-gaunt cheeks and frowning. Nancy hugs her from behind and smiles.

"Hey, my mom's a great cook. You keep eating at our house and your face will fill in in no time." *My mom, she's a pretty good cook.* That's what Mike said, back in the cafeteria, before he touched her mouth with his. She blushes and looks down, suddenly very excited.

Later that night at the Wheeler house, the table is full of food, all perfectly presented. There's a casserole, full of beef and carrots and even potatoes, broccoli for the side, warm rolls piled high on a plate. Glasses of wine for the parents, cups full of milk for the kids. El watches Karen and Nancy carefully as they eat, trying to match the grace of their movements. She ignores Mike shoveling casserole into his mouth next to her.

"El, you don't have to eat the broccoli, it's ok," Mike tells her, bits of food coming out as he speaks.

"Michael!" his mom chastises, "don't talk with your mouth full." Mike glowers down at his plate and groans, "Mooommm."

"Well I think the broccoli is great, Mom," Nancy adds primly, and her brother shoots her a glare. El quickly nods and takes a bite of the vegetable, swallowing before saying, "yummy."

"Traitor," Mike whispers, but smiles because it's El and she can do no wrong in his eyes. Luckily, Karen is distracted by Holly dropping food off her tray.

Ted, who has mainly been concentrating on his plate, looks up at El. "You're in Mike's class, right? How do you like Mr. Clarke?"

The entire table freezes and looks at him, minus Holly, who continues to mash her fingers in her casserole. No one has really explained to Ted about El, but they're definitely never said she was in school with Mike. Karen is about to say something but Mike beats her to it.

"She's Will's cousin. She's staying with him," he blurts out, trying to look nonchalant. Ted nods and goes back to his food, and everyone else relaxes. El whispers, "thanks," and Mike grabs her hand under the table and squeezes it.

After dinner is finished, Karen has Ted bring Holly upstairs for a bath and tells Nancy and Mike to clear the table. Then she brings El into the kitchen to help her with dessert. El trots closely after her, leaving the siblings bickering in the dining room.

"El, I'm so glad you came to dinner tonight. You're such a sweet girl," she says as she scoops ice cream into the bowls El's holding. The girl smiles up at her, having fallen in love with the woman over the course of the evening. Karen cocks her head and places her hand on El's shoulder, saying, "If you ever need anything, or need to talk, you can always come to me."

"Thank you," El whispers, eyes shining. They're interrupted by Mike coming up with his arms full of dishes and Karen runs to grab them before he drops any.

The rest of the evening is spent eating ice cream and watching television as Ted snores and Mike holding her hand as they wait at the door for Jonathan to pick her up. Karen will ask her to come back next week and Eleven will gladly accept.

11. The Results Are Concerning

I. 2003

"Well, ma'am, these results are...concerning. I'm very sorry to tell you this, but..." Eleven stares just over the doctor's shoulder as he explains what they've found. Explains why there haven't been any babies over the years. Explains that there never will be any. When he asks her what could have happened, she simply walks right out of the office and never returns.

It's her...she's the problem. Why, why, why did she ever think she could be normal? The apartment is empty when she gets home and she goes to the closet, shutting the door and slumping to the floor in darkness. She deserves the punishment.

Mike finds her in there later, curled up against the wall, tear-streaks lining her face. His heart drops to his stomach, his toes, the ground floor. Something is majorly wrong. "What are you doing in here?"

"It's my fault." She won't look him in the eye. He kneels down and softly asks, "What is?"

She tries to explain, her sentences punctuated by sobs. "That we haven't...that we can't...have a baby. The doctor, he said there was something wrong - it was like I had been... fried. Anything left in me is already dead. He didn't know...Mike...in the lab..." She succumbs to the tears and he crawls into the closet, pulling her against him, whispering, "this is not your fault, it's not your fault." But then he can't speak anymore because his throat is full of tears and his eyes are full of rage.

Brenner. That fucker. THAT FUCKER. He clutches her head and her back just to keep his hands from shaking. It's like the man is in the closet with them, Mike can almost feel his presence. He will never leave them alone. Mike clenches his eyes shut to keep from seeing red.

II.

Weeks go by, turning to months. He's sad. Sad that he won't see a

little boy with his hair and her eyes, sad that he'll never feel a kick through her stomach, sad that she is blaming herself. No, not sad...he is devastated.

Eleven's pulling into herself, getting quieter than ever. Mike looks at her in the evenings, unsure of what to do, what to say. He's never been this confused before - he's always known what to do to brighten her day, to get her to smile. But now she barely looks at him, barely eats, barely talks. Mike's stomach twists up more and more each day, angry at a long-dead man for what's happening to his wife.

She dreams of the lab every night now, of long, cold hallways that end in dark rooms and blood, of Papa ripping out her insides and tossing away fetuses. She wakes up multiple times a night, gasping, screaming, crying. Mike tries to hold her and soothe her back to sleep, but she feels the tension in him, blaming herself as always. He deserves better, deserves a real person. She will never be good enough for him.

Many days they don't talk and the apartment radiates with sadness.

III.

Everyone spends Thanksgiving in Hawkins that year. Brian, home from his first semester at Notre Dame. Holly, in town from Minneapolis. Will visiting from New York with Andrew, his boyfriend of five years. Also from New York, Nancy and Jonathan, with Steve and two little boys in tow. Dustin and his wife, Christy, from San Francisco, with their daughter and Christy's growing belly. Lucas from Chicago with his latest girlfriend, Sheila. And Mike and Eleven, quiet, tense, despondent.

Mike sees what's coming, especially on Saturday when Joyce insists on all the girls going with her to the store. She tries to bring Andrew as well, but Will pulls him back, giving his mom a look as if to say his boyfriend can handle it. That's when Mike escapes to the bathroom in the Byers-Hopper house, splashing water on his face and breathing before facing what's out there.

When he returns, it's just as he expects - Hopper sitting in the chair with a scowl, Lucas and Dustin standing in the doorway with looks of concern. Nancy, Steve and Jonathan on the couch, arms all folded

and the boys at home with Holly. Brian sitting on the floor in the corner looking confused, holding Scout, Hank's successor. Will looking at Mike with a furrowed brow and Andrew looking at his boyfriend with worry.

Hopper finally breaks the silence. "What's going on, kid?"

That almost pushes Mike over the edge - don't call him kid, don't act like he's a child. He doesn't try to hide the spite in his voice when he answers, "What do you mean?"

"Don't give me that. She hasn't smiled a damn time the whole weekend. You look like you could snap. Now-" He's interrupted by Nancy, who tries to take a kinder route.

"We're worried about you guys, Mike."

"Yeah, we want to help," Lucas adds.

"It's nothing. You're wasting your time."

"Bullshit," Dustin scoffs and Mike whips his head to look at him.

"What did you say?"

"I said, bullshit. Mike, we've known you both forever. You're our friends, we want to help you."

"Nothing is wrong." Mike shakes his head and tries to leave the room. Dustin and Lucas block him and the former grabs his arm. Mike violently throws him off and yells, "No, you don't get it!"

"What don't I get?" Dustin steps closer, and Jonathan and Steve both stand up.

"You don't - you can't," Mike sputters, unable to express his thoughts. He tries to move away but Dustin just grabs him again.

"Try me, Mike."

"Get off!"

"I'm trying to help!"

"I said get off!" He rips his arm from Dustin and sends a frame flying off the wall, shattering on the floor. Scout is barking wildly, but everyone else is silent. Dustin tries once more.

"Mike..."

"YOUR WIFE IS PREGNANT!" he shouts and Dustin's eyes widen in shock. This was not the answer he expected. "What?"

"You won't understand. Because of Chelsea, because of the baby," Mike growls, then turns to Nancy on the couch. "Because of Nicky and Evan." Then turns to Hopper, still in the chair. "She can't have kids, ok? The doctor told her in August. It's not possible."

"That's not her fault," Jonathan says, and Mike's nostrils flare wide with rage.

"I KNOW THAT! I NEVER SAID THAT!" he roars, and lunges at Jonathan, but luckily Lucas and Andrew grab him and hold him back. He's breathing heavily, trying to fight them off. Nancy steps in front of Jonathan, eyes wide with concern. "Mike," she whispers.

Mike slumps to the ground, still being held by the two men. "It was the lab. Those experiments they did on her - they fried her right up. They never gave her a chance. And you know what?" He starts to laugh wildly. "She thinks it's all her fault. She thinks she deserves it."

Everyone holds their breath, unsure of what to say. Mike slams his palm against the floor, making them jump.

"She has nightmares every night, she dreams about him, still calls him Papa and HE DID THIS TO HER. He fucking...she never had a fucking chance." He starts to sob, all the tears that have built up over the months washing down his face.

Will kneels in front of him, and softly says, "It's ok to be angry. It's ok to be sad." Mike whimpers and collapses against his friend, letting out all of his feelings. Will holds him close, looking around the room at everyone with tears in his eyes. Lucas rubs his back and Andrew steps aside for Dustin and Nancy, who respectively caress his arm and hair.

It's a solid twenty minutes before he calms down enough for the conversation to continue.

IV.

The ride back to Chicago is quiet, but once they get back into the apartment and drop their bags, Mike reaches for her wrist and pulls her back.

"El," he whispers. She turns to look up at him, eyes wide and shaky.

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry." She furrows her brows, looking confused, and he continues, "I'm so sorry. I should have...I didn't..." He sighs and looks down at the floor. "I'm not mad at you. I need you to know that. I've never, never blamed you for this. I just...seeing you like this is killing me. And I don't know what to do. I don't know how to fix it. And...I hate myself for that."

El reaches over and grasps his other hand, staring at him, hoping he'll lift his eyes. "Mike..." she whispers, and he darts his eyes to hers before continuing.

"We'll figure something out. And if we never have any kids, I don't care, I just want you. You...you are everything to me."

She nods back vigorously, tears in her eyes, and clasps his hands tighter. "I love you," she whispers and he grabs her close, burying his face in her hair.

"I love you, I love you, I love you."

V. 2005

Eleven holds up the photo and stares at them. Two little girls, sisters, six and two. Audrey and Tess. Fathers unknown, mother long gone.

Mike whispers in awe, "They're-"

"Pretty," she finishes. Tears threaten to fall. He softly strokes her hair, pulls her head close and drops a kiss on it.

"They're perfect," he adds.

Soon these girls will come to live with them, will be officially adopted, will eventually call them Mama and Daddy. Tess will cling to El like a koala, will giggle at Mike's tickles. Audrey will take longer to warm up - she's older and wiser and knows to trust no one. But then she'll pull on Mike's hand at the zoo, begging him to explain everything to her, and ask El to plait her hair every morning, just to feel her gentle hands. Jonathan will capture photos of them during a Christmas visit to Hawkins and Audrey will use one for her class presentation on family.

12. Hail! Hail! To Michigan

February 1990

I.

On a cold winter morning, Eleven gets on a bus heading to Michigan. Joyce has bundled her up as best she can, worrying over her "little girl." This is El's first trip outside Hawkins by herself and as they get ready to leave the house, Joyce frets over her.

"Do you have his phone number just in case? Are these mittens warm enough? Are you sure you can fit everything in one backpack?"

Little Brian is pulling on her jeans, whining, and with a flick of her mind she floats him off her while keeping her eyes on Joyce. He giggles hysterically; this is his favorite game. Hopper cuts into woman's lecture on the importance of extra socks.

"Don't do any of that while you're there," he says. He worries about her up there as well - too many people, too many strangers, anyone could see and talk. He still has a fear that the government will intervene if they make too much noise. Even after everything that happened in '87, after finally working out the deal last year to legalize her, he's still scared that he'll wake up one day and they'll have taken her back. She's his daughter now and sometimes he worries that he can't protect her well enough. Even though she could kill them all, she often seems like a fragile deer to her parents. "I want you to be careful."

"I understand," she tells him with a nod, feeling the edge of fear in him. She knows he's serious and she knows he's right.

II.

Mike's excited, partly because he hasn't seen her since the semester started but also because this is her first time visiting him here. He stands impatiently at the bus station, bouncing on his feet, compulsively looking at his watch. Finally the bus pulls in and she steps off, looking tiny in a large coat and hat. Before she can take three steps, he's out the door and pulling her into his arms. Six - no, seven - no wait, eight - kisses later, they leave the station for his

dorm.

Bruce, Mike's roommate, has been interested in meeting El for a while now - this girl that Mike always talks about, who sends letters that make him laugh, who seems to have a lot of nightmares ("she had a rough childhood" is all Mike says about that). He likes her right away. She's quiet, but funny, and is looking all around their dorm room (which Mike had insisted on finally cleaning).

She reaches up and pulls the curtain aside to look out the window and that's when Bruce sees it.

"Is that a tattoo?"

She snatches her hand back, holding it to her chest. Mike notices the action, but Bruce seems oblivious. "What's it of?"

She slowly holds out her arm for him to see, unsure of what to say.

"Eleven...oh, like your nickname?"

"What?" she softly asks and Mike raises an eyebrow, confused by his roommate.

"Yeah, that's what Mike calls you sometimes, right?" Bruce has heard Mike use the name every so often and has just assumed that it's a nickname he made up. Mike quickly picks up on this and answers, "Oh, yeah, that's an old nickname. It's silly." He hopes he sounds convincing and looks over at El, who seems to read his mind.

"Yes, that's why I got it. Because of Mike."

"Cool! I really want one but can't decide what to get." The conversation turns to Bruce's tattoo options and El pulls her sleeves back down to her palms.

Mike introduces her as his girlfriend to the other people on his floor, something that still takes getting used to. Back in Hawkins they never referred to each other as boyfriend-and-girlfriend. It always seemed bigger than that, different. Boyfriend didn't properly convey "boy who took me in from the rain and taught me the world and never gave up"; girlfriend wasn't enough to describe "girl who pulled me off

a cliff and never judged me and could snap your neck with her mind but still acts like I'm her hero." They never even had a formal talk or decision about their relationship - it just was and then it grew. But no one here would understand so it's easier to use labels. Eleven thinks it's cute.

III.

Mike takes El on a tour of the campus, pointing out which buildings he has classes in and the dining hall with its questionable food. As a few snowflakes start to fall, they duck into a local cafe and order coffees.

"You're drinking coffee now?" El asks with a pointed look. Mike's been teasing her about her coffee love for years, seeing as none of the boys like it. She picked up the habit from Hopper, the two being the earliest risers in the house.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. But these late nights are killing me, I need something. I still can't believe you drink it black," he says as he dumps sugar into his.

"That's the only way Hop would let me have it." It's true, the man would make her Eggo's in the morning and let her douse them with syrup, but when it came to coffee, anything but black was sacrilegious. They settle into a table in the back, letting the hot coffee and cozy atmosphere warm them up.

"I like your friends. They're nice."

"Yeah, they're cool. They definitely make it fun here. But..."

"But?"

He sighs and looks up at the ceiling. "They're not the same. They're not the guys. They're not you."

"I know what you mean." She takes his hand on the table, interlacing their fingers.

"I'm sure everyone says this, but...they don't always get it. Get me. Everything that happened..." he trails off with a shrug.

"There's only a few of us who really understand. Ten to be exact."

"Yeah. And I really miss all of them. You, mostly."

"Really? I thought you missed Steve the most." A playful glint lights up her eyes.

"Well, yeah, you got me there. But after Steve, it's definitely you."

She laughs softly, playing with his hand. "I miss you the most, too."

"Oh I thought you were dating Troy now," he deadpans and she smirks.

"After the tree incident last year, he runs every time he sees me."

"Doesn't sound like a healthy relationship to me."

She sticks her tongue out at him before finishing her coffee. She's missed this, joking around with him and actually being able to see his face.

"Should we head back to the dorm?"

IV.

A group from his floor goes out that night and convinces Mike and El to join them. They all end up at a house right off campus, everyone filling up red cups. El peeks into Mike's cup.

"Is that beer?"

"Yeah. It's not very good, no one has any money. Do you want one?" She nods and he fills a cup for her. She's not a big fan of the bitter taste but slowly nurses it over the evening.

They mostly stick to one corner of the house and chat with Mike's floormates and friends of friends. El likes them all - they're funny and boisterous and so welcoming to her. They all seem so happy to be here, at this school, at this part of their lives. The feeling is contagious and between that and the two beers she's feeling light and giggly. After a few hours the group decides to move on to another house, but Mike and El are itching to get back to the dorm while

Bruce is still out, so they opt to go home.

Mike stops to use the bathroom before they head out, and El decides to wait for him on the porch. She's feeling sleepy and the crisp winter air helps her wake up. She's examining the graffiti on the side of the house when the door opens.

"Well hello there." A stranger, a boy, slurring his words. "I've never seen you here before. You a freshman?"

"I'm just visiting."

"Oh, well then I should be a good host and show you around." He's holding two cups of beer, the liquid sloshing dangerously close to the edge as he leans forward.

"No thank you, I'm ok."

"Yeah but I live right here, I could give you a proper tour of the house." He's smirking, a little like her friends do when they flirt with girls but there's another layer to it. An arrogance she can't quite figure out. "Maybe you can give me a tour of what's under that coat."

She's confused - boys in Hawkins aren't really like this (mainly because everyone knows Elle Byers and Mike Wheeler are attached at the hip). She didn't go to high school, and the boys played gatekeeper to those who interacted with her. In many ways, she's been fairly sheltered. Someday this will happen to her again and she'll throw the man against a building and keep on her merry way. But right now she isn't sure what to do. The guy moves his head to meet her eyes, trying to grab her attention again.

"Hey sweetheart, you all right there?" He says and offers her a cup. "Here, have a drink. It'll make you feel better."

She takes the cup from him but doesn't drink, just looks down at it in her hand. Something is wrong here. Now that his hand is free he brings it up to her face, brushing away some of her long hair. She freezes, fully panicking, unable to even flinch away. What does she do, what does she do, what does she do?

"Wow, your hair is so soft," he comments as he plays with her locks.

She can't breathe. Then she catches something in the corner of her eye. Mike's finally come outside and is looking confused at the scene before him. But then her panicked eyes lock with his and he realizes what's going on. With two quick strides he's at her side pulling the guy's arm down with a jerk.

"What are you doing?" Mike asks, voice dangerously low.

"Hey, chill man."

"What are you doing?" This time more forceful.

"What's your problem?" He pushes Mike's shoulder aggressively. "I'm just talking to the girl. She looks like she would enjoy a real man for once."

Mike shoves him hard into the side of the house. "Leave her alone."

"Fine, I don't know what you want with the frigid bitch anyway." Mike's eyes go dark and his fist is aimed at the guy's jaw but El grabs his arm and pulls him back.

"Mike, let's just go. He's stupid. Let's go." She pulls on him again and he leaves the porch with her. After a couple blocks he calms down enough to ask her, "Are you ok?"

She nods, looking scared but sheepish. "I should have done something. I just froze."

"Hey, that was not your fault. Don't blame yourself."

"I panicked. I wanted to...push him away, push him off the porch, but...Hop told me not to use my powers here."

"What?"

"He told me not to use my powers. It's too dangerous. Someone might see."

Mike stops her and looks at her with wide eyes. "El, if you need to use your powers because you're in trouble, do it. No matter where, no matter what. I bet you Hopper would say the exact same thing."

Promise me, ok?"

"Promise," she replies and will remember this moment for the rest of her life. When a guy grabs her butt, when they're mugged in New York - no more hesitation. Mike wraps his arm around her shoulders and starts walking again.

"Come on, let's get back."

V.

They do everything slowly on Sunday morning, hoping that if they stay still, maybe time will too. Bruce goes to the library to study, but they still whisper even when he's left. Scrunched together on his tiny dorm bed, mumbling about nothing at all, playing with each other's fingers. But the clock ticks on and too soon they're wrapping up in their winter layers and leaving for the bus station.

They stand outside the bus until the last minute, arms wrapped tight, Mike breathing in her scent and Eleven listening to his heartbeat.

"So, you're coming back up next weekend, right?" El laughs and buries her face further into his jacket so he can barely hear her mumble,

"How about next month? For your birthday?"

He smiles and presses his cheek against her hat. "Can't wait."

13. Yes

I. June 1994

After graduation, Mike moves to Chicago, living with Lucas and doing grad work at the University of Chicago. Will moves out to New York and Dustin stays in California. Eleven remains in Hawkins, working at the library, reading everything in sight, starting to feel a bit constrained in the small town. She goes up to Chicago sometimes; she likes it there - the bustle of the city but less claustrophobic than New York, the lake providing space and air and light.

On this June day, Mike is visiting home, and El spends every spare minute with him. Ted and Karen have left to take Holly to summer camp, and the two take refuge from the oppressive heat in his basement. They're feeling lazy and silly and after El makes a comment about the old blanket fort, they decide to make a new one. It's a little bigger than the original, but not by much. They lie there side by side, Popsicles in their mouths, relaying stories of the library and the university and things they've heard from their friends. After a while they quiet down, almost dozing, content to hear each other's breathing.

El stares at the blanket above her, thinking of the first time she slept under it. Scared and cold and confused, but this boy gave her clothes and a name and spoke so kindly that she felt comfortable enough to fall asleep. She's never forgotten that night, that week, every feeling she had as her world took on color and music and life. Sometimes she's amazed that it wasn't a dream, that it still isn't, that she won't wake up in that little bed with the lion in her arms and Papa just outside the door.

She's thought about it a lot lately, over the past few months, and there's a question dancing on her tongue but she hasn't been able to ask it yet. Until now. Now seems perfect.

"Mike?" She softly asks, turning her head to look at him next to her.

"Mhmm?" He hums, his eyes closed.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?" He opens his eyes and looks at her.

"Will you marry me?"

His mouth opens but nothing comes out because his whole body has stopped. Her eyes are wide, looking into him, and as he pauses she purses her lips together. He finally, hoarsely, asks,

"You want me to marry you?"

"Yes. Why wouldn't I? Unless you don't want to." She looks almost nervous.

He springs up on his elbow and looks down at her. "What? Of course I do! I've - I've actually been thinking about it for a while now, but I wanted to save, you know, for a ring."

"I don't need that." She gently shakes her head and gives a tiny smile, her lips stained red from the cherry popsicle.

"Ok," his smile widening, eyes shining.

"I just want this."

"Ok." This time barely a whisper and he pulls her up for a kiss, laughing against her lips because he still can't believe what's going on.

He leans back and tries to look stern. "You know, this was supposed to be my job!"

She sweetly shrugs. "I wanted it. So I asked."

He laughs again, shaking his head in wonder, looking up at the blanket.

"What is it?"

"I don't know, I just...I was this little spazz of a kid and you were this amazing girl and I loved you so much and then you were gone but

you found me and now you want to marry me. YOU want to marry ME. I - I'm not even making sense, I'm just - I'm so happy."

"So that's a yes?"

"Yes! Yes! Hell yes!" He buries his face in the crook of her neck and holds her tightly, tears forming his eyes, and she clutches at his shirt and closes her eyes in happiness.

II. July 1994

They keep it to themselves for a few weeks, reveling in this secret of theirs. Mike comes to Hawkins again for the Fourth of July and they arrange for a meeting with all four parents. Mike thinks that maybe Hopper won't kill him if his mom is there.

"He's not going to kill you."

"We don't know that."

"He likes you."

"We don't know that either."

"Believe me, he does. Don't worry."

When they've gathered both sets of parents, Mike stutters and beats around the bush until El takes over and gives it to them straight. Joyce lets out a little shriek of delight, covering her mouth with her hands. Karen places a hand on her heart and immediately starts congratulating them ("Oh my goodness, oh this is so wonderful"). Ted stands to shake his son's hand and Hopper gives El a proud grin (he does not kill Mike, in fact he hugs the boy, much to Mike's surprise).

They don't want anything grand - they'd prefer to get married right away. Karen just seems thrilled that there's a wedding at all, considering her oldest daughter has been living with two men for five years now and no talk of marriage - to either one.

Mike has convinced the other three boys to come home for the Fourth and lines them up on his basement couch as he and El stand before them. Hands held tight, smiles barely contained, eyes glittering, they

make their announcement.

"We're getting married." The three stare up at them in shock for a moment, before Dustin breaks the silence.

"Holy fuck."

Lucas smacks his arm. "Dustin! Way to ruin a moment."

"Um, you're hitting me now so you're the one ruining it," he replies with a light shove.

"Shut up!"

"No, you-

"Are you guys done yet?" Mike cuts in and the two quickly sit up straight. Will is smiling widely next to them and jumps up to hug his sister and pulls Mike in too. Dustin and Lucas are quick to follow.

"Mike, we're gonna be brothers!"

"What? No fair, you guys!" Dustin complains as he rubs Mike's head affectionately.

"Yeah, how do we get in on this? Is Holly available?" Lucas jokes as he embraces El.

"So who's gonna be your best man?"

"I was thinking Steve."

III. August 1994

They go simple and sweet. She wears a long white slip, hair flowing down her back, topped with a daisy crown made by Holly. He wears a white shirt and vest, forgoing a tie.

In true Mike fashion, he names Lucas, Dustin and Will all as his best men. Dustin tries to argue that you can only have one, but Mike says "you lost that argument years ago."

It's small, just their families in the backyard at the Byers-Hopper

house. Mr. Clarke attends with his wife and son and Dustin brings Christy, his college girlfriend (it's getting serious and he's finally brought her to Indiana to meet his family). Pastor Charles comes out to officiate and Jonathan takes hundreds of photos.

Mike isn't supposed to see her until the ceremony, but when he pops inside to use the bathroom he runs right into her. Literally. He's about to apologize when he realizes it's her and he gets a good look at her. Brian had told him she looks like a fairy and Mike thinks to himself that the boy was dead right. She's glowing and beautiful and his. "You're..."

"Yes?" She whispers, a warmth growing in her chest because his eyes look so loving and his outfit is so perfectly him and he's hers.

"The prettiest." She smiles with all her teeth and ducks her head and he leans forward to lift her chin up for a kiss. But Nancy swoops in and shuffles her brother out, Eleven sending him off with a little wave.

Her three brothers crowd around her all at once, Brian pressed against her waist and Will and Jonathan taking turns hugging her shoulders. They whisper congratulations and I-love-yous and tell her how wonderful she is. Lucas and Dustin clasp her hands and tell her that the weirdo really cleans up nicely, before they're pushed outside by the girls.

Joyce comes in with flowers, the daisies and buttercups and wildflowers that Holly was charged with picking, and hands them to El before looking her over. She fixes a few strands of hair and then pulls her in for a hug, because she's already getting weepy and the ceremony hasn't even started, dammit.

"Thank you for being my mom," the girl whispers and Joyce breaks down into tears, tightening her hold on her daughter. She has a flash of Terry Ives but tucks it away in the back of her mind; she'll bring it out another time, as she does every so often. Hopper gently pulls her off the bride, handing her a tissue before sending her to Will for her entrance.

Hopper looks down at Eleven and she looks up at him and neither

one says a word. They've always been good at communicating silently. For a long time, he thought he would never walk anyone down an aisle. For a long time, she didn't know what a father was supposed to be. He squeezes her hand as they leave the house and she squeezes back.

The ceremony is short and Mike and El spend most of it trying to hold in laughter - they're so full of joy. Joyce has tears rolling down her face and Karen daintily dabs her eyes with handkerchief and Lucas of all people tears up and tries to hide it (Dustin definitely notices but simply pats his shoulder). In what seems like a flash they're already walking back down the aisle, everyone cheering and clapping behind them. They look at each other with the widest of smiles - they did it, they're married, they'll be together always.

Dinner is held in the backyard and as dusk falls they light sparklers. El thinks back to her first real birthday, all the magic and lights and her second kiss. She reminds Mike about the latter and he leans down to recreate it.

Jonathan will capture this moment (their eyes locked after just breaking from a kiss, faces lit up by the sparkler in her hand) and it will be their favorite photo of the day - the one he'll keep on his desk at work and she'll hang in various homes over the years and their children will hold when they ask about how they fell in love.

14. The Tree Incident

(Warning: some harsh language ahead because Troy is a grade-A homophobic asshole.)

November 1988

On a crisp autumn Saturday, the boys (and El) plan to meet on the train tracks. They do this every November, walking the length through Hawkins, an unspoken tribute to that November years ago when their entire world changed.

Eleven and Mike are late meeting the others because sometimes you just get caught up kissing and forget to look at the clock. They walk briskly, faces flushed and fingers interlaced until they see the tracks and, more importantly, what's on them. Will on the ground with Troy bent over him, Lucas and Dustin held back by his goons.

Lucas, Dustin and Will all arrive together (on time) and are waiting for the other two when their lifelong bully shows up. Troy has been wary of El for years but he still bothers the boys when she isn't around, and right now she's nowhere in sight.

"Oh look, boys, I think we walked in on a little gangbang."

"Troy, just leave."

"Shut up Midnight, little Willie here wants me to stay. Don't you, queer?"

Will says nothing, clenching his jaw and looking up at Troy. The bully has grown over the years and now towers over him. Troy repeats "don't you?" and roughly shoves Will's shoulder - once and then again hard enough to push the boy to the ground.

"Hey!"

"Stop it!"

Lucas and Dustin rush toward their friend but are quickly held back by James, who's also grown large, and Garrett, their friend who is the

biggest of the three. Troy ignores them and leans over Will, continuing to taunt him.

"You should just stay down there 'til the train comes - one less fairy around here."

"Troy...stop" Will softly growls, but Troy kicks him in the side.

"Ah suck it, fag. Oh wait, you'd probably like that."

"Troy," James warns - he's spotted El by the trees. Troy ignores him and goes on.

"I bet you dream about that, you little faggot."

"Troy!"

"What?" Troy snaps and looks up at James, only to see that he's pointing. At El. "Oh, shit."

James quickly lets go of Dustin - he's seen this before and knows to back off. But Garrett hasn't experienced Eleven in all her glory and keeps a tight hold on Lucas.

She's tightly coiled, ready to burst - that's her friend, her brother, a human being. *How dare he...*

Troy lifts off the ground and Garrett drops Lucas in shock. He's wheezing and grabbing at his neck, as if to pull something off but of course there's nothing there. His legs flail wildly, trying to reach the ground again.

"Shit, she's Darth-Vadering him," Dustin whispers.

"El..." Lucas slowly says and takes a step toward her. As much as they hate Troy, as terrible as he is, they don't want to kill him.

El doesn't respond, but she releases the pressure on Troy's throat, the boy gasping loudly but still floating. Suddenly his shirt violently tears off him, followed shortly by his pants and he's left in only his boxers. Then he shoots up, up, up until he's at the top of the nearest tree, where she lets him drop. He catches the top branches and clings to

them, shaking, covered in scratches from the branches on the way up.

She fills his mind with thoughts, blood starting to gush from her nose. Telepathy is always harder for her - the mind is a tightly tangled web, difficult to infiltrate. It takes so much energy that she very rarely uses it.

Don't you ever look at him, don't you ever talk to him. I'll kill you next time. I'll rip you limb from limb like a bug because that's what you are, that's what you're worth.

Mike's standing the closest and his rage feeds into her, a dark red-hot energy that pushes her farther than she normally would have gone.

Lucas hears Troy's cries and sees the blood streaming down El's face, staining the front of her jacket. When her ears start bleeding, he knows he needs to stop her. A quick glance at his friends confirms that they won't be any help - Mike is so full of anger he'll let her do whatever she wants, Will is completely overwhelmed, and Dustin always gets a little awestruck by her powers. It's up to him to be the responsible one. He edges over until he's right in front of her. "El."

Her eyes flick down to meet his and suddenly they widen, as if she's just realized exactly what's going on.

"I think he's had enough. Let's go. He's not worth it. Ok? Come on, let's go." She lets him take her shoulder and gently turn her back to the group. They begin to walk down the tracks, El tired and almost confused - everything is a little hazy. At this, Mike finally snaps to attention and runs up to join them.

"El, do you have enough tissues? I think I have some," he says as he reaches into his back pocket. She always carries some in her jacket but they're not enough this time, even with the few Mike adds.

Dustin holds out a hand to help Will stand up and brushes off his back, giving him a half-smile before they follow their friends. The other three stop and wait for them to catch up, Mike slinging his arm around Will's shoulders when he gets there and Lucas nodding before leading them off again.

"I think we should clean you up at my house. Your mom'll flip if she sees you like this," Mike tells Eleven.

Lucas adds, "And the chief."

Will is grateful, but a small part wishes he could take care of himself. He's still short and scrawny and feels like a weakling. Sometimes he's afraid that the others feel responsible for protecting him - the boy who vanished, the boy who was sick, the boy who couldn't fight the darkness. He doesn't want to add "the boy who likes other boys" to that list and that's why he hasn't told them.

Later that night, after the blood is washed off and Dustin has driven them home, Will will stand outside the door to El's room, gathering the courage to knock. She will stand on the other side with her hand on the knob, ready to open it when he does. He'll sigh and return to his room with a heavy heart. She'll nod to herself and wait for when he's ready.

And Troy? Well, Troy will never speak to them again.

15. Beenips and Dice

"Something's coming...something hungry for blood."

"What is it?"

"It's the demogorgon."

"It's not the demogorgon."

"Boom...boom...it's the demogorgon!" Mike exclaims as he slams the figurine on the board.

"Oh, we're in deep shit," Dustin moans as he places his hands on his head.

"Uncle Dustin said a bad word!" Tess sings from the other side of the room.

"Tess, we're trying to play!" Audrey whines from Will's side.

Mike holds back a smile. He probably should make Dustin censor himself more but this is Dungeons and Dragons - it's not the same without all the cursing. It's 2011 and with everyone finally in the same place at once - for Thanksgiving - the boys have decided it's time to teach the next generation.

They've all paired off into student/teacher pairs. Dustin has his daughter, Chelsea, now eleven years old. Twelve-year-old Audrey is with Will, her favorite uncle (although she would never say that aloud). Nick, now thirteen, picks Lucas because he too prefers the aggressive plays. And his brother, eleven-year-old Evan, sits at Mike's side, helping with some of the plot points in his prepubescent voice.

Tess, now eight, and Jake Henderson, now seven, are rummaging through the old boxes of dress-up clothes in the corner.

"Jake, you're sure you don't want to join in?" Dustin calls over and his son yells back, "No Dad, I'm getting married to Tess."

Mike lifts an eyebrow and peers at Dustin over his folder.

"Henderson, your son is making moves on my daughter."

"Actually, Wheeler, I think it's the other way around." They both look over at Tess, who dons a serious look.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, Miss Tess?"

"I need paper for the beenip."

"The beenip?"

"Yeah, a beenip, for our moneys." She crosses her arms and nods.

"I think she means a prenup," Will says with a quizzical look.

"Yes!" She smiles, her front teeth only half grown-in. Dustin gives her a pointed look. "Hey, Jake is not marrying you for your money. This is love."

Mike ignores him and narrows his eyes at his younger daughter. "Where did you even learn about prenups?"

"Grandpa Hop told me."

"Of course," he sighs and rolls his eyes to the ceiling.

"Dad!" Audrey interrupts. "Can we please get back to the game?"

Lucas looks up from his phone to agree. "Yeah, what are we doing about this demogorgon?"

"I say we fight it!" Nick eagerly says with a wide smile. Will hums before saying, "I'm not sure about that one, Nicky."

Nick's face takes on that classic teenage scowl as he moans, "It's Nick, Uncle Will. Nick. I thought we all agreed on that."

"That's not what your mom says, Nicky," Dustin jokes wth a smirk, drawing out the boy's name.

"Well she's not here right now." True, Nancy took her other boys out

for a well-deserved date night. Mike gives Evan a poke and the boy shouts, "He's getting tired! Of- of- of what, Uncle Mike?"

"Of their silly bickering," Mike whispers.

"Of your silly bickering!"

The rest of the tables confers, Nick and Lucas winning the argument and they decide to roll on a fireball. Audrey tosses the die and they hold their breaths as it flies to the table.

And lands on a thirteen.

The cheers fills the house, reaching all the way up to the bathroom on the second floor. Inside, Andrew bounces baby Grace on his hip while Eleven leans over the tub washing up Daniel. He's three and fairly new to the family but is already smitten with his new mom.

"You don't play with them?" Andrew asks as he hears the noise from two floors down.

"No. I always just liked to listen."

"Listen to that?" He asks with an incredulous face. She doesn't look up at him, but concentrates on wiping around Daniel's face instead.

"I found it calming. It was so different from what I was used to."

Andrew merely hums in response, feeling a bit awkward. He forgets sometimes where she came from, different than the other boys, definitely different than his cushy childhood in upstate New York. It's something he and Christy have bonded over through the years (she grew up in a well-off suburb of LA). They love their spouses' friends and have heard all the stories, but when the gang is together they sometimes feel they are on the other side of a screen looking in.

El pulls Daniel out of the tub and wraps him in a fluffy towel, squeezing him as he giggles. She relishes the sound - six months ago he wouldn't laugh for any of them. After getting him in his fleece onesie, the four leave the bathroom.

They walk downstairs and see Katie, Lucas' newest girlfriend, with

Holly in the kitchen. They're flipping through magazines on the island, Katie's eyes glued to Holly's new engagement ring. Nonchalantly she says, "Maybe Jesse should talk to Lucas..."

Andrew and El share a glance - Katie is even younger than Holly and although she's nice, she's a little bit of a twit. Lucas has a habit of having very short but intense relationships, always bringing the girl home to meet his family and friends. Mrs. Sinclair would appreciate if he would stop until he's actually dated someone for a year. And they still make fun of the fact that a girl named Tiffany appears in all of the photos from Dustin's wedding - the only time the gang ever met her. Needless to say, Katie is gone by March.

"Is that my handsome grandson?" Karen asks as she enters the kitchen, having just returned from dinner with a friend. Daniel shyly smiles from El's arms, a blush appearing on his dark cheeks. Grandma Karen is pretty and nice and smells good. He likes her. (Grandma Joyce is fun and kind and plays games with him. He likes her too.) "Do you want Grandma to tuck you in bed?"

He nods and she takes him from El, who kisses his head and promises to check on him later. Karen leaves the room, past Ted snoring in his chair, up to Mike's old bedroom where the children are sleeping this weekend. Mike's family took the Wheeler house this holiday, while Nancy's is at the Byers-Hopper home.

Now empty-handed, El smiles at Andrew and motions to the basement door. "Well, shall we?"

"You go. I'll stay up here with the civilized folk." Katie has noticed Grace in his arms and is reaching over - apparently she's baby-crazy as well. El shrugs and turns to leave.

"Suit yourself."

She quietly descends the stairs into the basement and makes herself comfortable on the couch, closing her eyes. It could be 1985 again, except for the girls' voices. Audrey shouts and cheers and El doesn't need to look to picture the excitement on Mike's face. After a while Tess and Jake join her on the couch, El wrapping them in blankets and holding them close and they listen together until the campaign

comes to an end.

16. Please Stay

August 1986

It's an ordinary Thursday at the Wheeler house in late summer, Ted at work, Karen off somewhere with Holly and the boys in the basement finishing up another campaign. It's been a shorter one, already wrapping up in the early afternoon. The boys get up and stretch, still chattering excitedly about their win, and Eleven lies on the couch, completely passed out.

Mike runs upstairs to get more juice and the other are picking up the game pieces when they hear El start to groan and toss in her sleep.

She's back, back in the lab, bare feet on cold floors and the metallic taste of blood and the screaming of animals in her head. Harsh light, but the alternative is the dark room and no, no, she knows it's coming but no...

She's moving more violently and Dustin, meaning well, tries to gently shake her awake, but that proves to be a mistake when she jerks up with a gasp. Lucas and Will look on from the other side of the table and Mike is halfway down the stairs when he sees it.

Dustin flies back into a nearby cabinet, his head meeting the corner with a sickening crack. He sees stars and when he reaches to touch the back of his head, his fingers come away with blood. Across the room El stares with wide shaky eyes, mouth open in anguish. No one says anything and she trembles violently as she stands and backs away along the wall, unable to draw full breaths, tears catching in her throat. Mike makes it to the bottom of the stairs but is quickly held there. He pleads with her, please, please let him help, but she shakes her head as tears start to fall. She doesn't let him go until she's reached the door and left. By the time he's outside, he can't see her.

Mike leaves to look for her and the others bring Dustin home. By the time he finds her, alone at her room, she's throwing clothes and other items into a backpack. When she sees him, she backs away, keeping several feet between them.

"What are you doing?" Mike asks, even though it's clear she's running away. He looks at the eclectic piles of goods on her bed. "Is that an ax?"

"I shouldn't be here. I should...I have to go." Her voice is wavering, eyes starting to leak again.

"No." He barely gets it out, his throat constricting at the thought of her gone again.

"What if I - what if I hurt someone, what if I hurt Will or the baby or - or - or you. What if I k-" she breaks into an anguished shriek, crying and hyperventilating and unable to calm down. What if she killed someone? What if she killed him?

"No, you won't. I know you won't. Please, El, please. Come here, please." His voice cracks, he's crying now too.

She shakes her head violently. "I told you, I'm the monster. I'm, I'm..." She doesn't belong here, doesn't he get that? She'll end him.

"No, no you're not," he says as he takes a few steps toward her.

"I am," she insists, her voice rising and gasps deepening and he stops in his tracks. "Everything is my fault. Dustin is hurt. Will is still sick. Those slugs are everywhere. I hurt Dustin. I opened the gate. I did it. It's me. It's me."

He shakes his head, his own tears falling. "No."

"If I hadn't opened it, everything would be good again."

His chest hurts, his heart aches at the very thought of it. This girl before him, tears everywhere, she rips right through his soul. "No!"

"Mike-"

"El, listen to me, please. You can't leave, ok? I don't - I don't know what I'd do. I...you...you're wrong. If you were gone, everything would be awful. After you left, the first time, yeah, Will was back and yeah, we didn't know he was sick but everything was still wrong. You weren't here. I missed you, I missed you so much."

She continues to cry, but she doesn't stop him from talking. He takes another step closer.

"If you left now, everyone would be sad. The guys would miss you, Will loves you - you're his sister now. Jonathan, Nancy... And the chief and Mrs. Byers? They love you so much. They would be so, so sad. Even my mom and Holly. And I - I wouldn't stop looking for you. It would kill me. Because...because..." And maybe he shouldn't say it, maybe he's only fifteen and silly but he knows what he knows and it's true, isn't it? Isn't it? She deserves to know. "Because I love you. I love you."

"Please, El. Please." He reaches out, fingers shaking, to brush a tear from her cheek and she lets him, her expression frozen and scared, but she lets him. "Please stay."

She slowly nods and his mouth twitches, almost smiling, as he opens his arms to her. She hesitates, then takes the two steps until she's against him and his arms are around her. He drops his face to the top of her head and whispers into her hair, "Please don't go, please don't go," and she clutches his shirt and nods over and over against his chest until well after their tears have dried.

Dustin gets ten stitches, and they all agree to a cover story that involves horseplay and tripping and nothing about Eleven. And the boys notice that in the weeks afterward Mike and El stand a little closer and hold hands a little longer and they even see the two kissing sometimes. They pretend to be grossed out but secretly feel that something is right with the world.

17. The City That Never Sleeps

I.

Eleven takes her first plane ride in 1991, the boys having decided to go to New York that summer to visit Nancy and company. She's excited for the trip, excited to see a different part of the country, but right now she's not so sure about this whole plane business. She makes it through takeoff with her hands clenching the armrest and Mike's hand, but they've been in the air for almost an hour and her knuckles are still white (as is Mike's hand). Lucas, just across the aisle from her, notices and leans over to speak in a low voice.

"You know, El, you should be the least scared of all of us. If anything happens, you can use your powers."

"Shut up Lucas, you're scaring her more!" Mike forcefully whispers as he leans around El to see him. He can feel her discomfort but is taking a more overprotective route - don't make anything worse, just hold her hand and get her through it. Lucas makes a face; he's trying to battle her fear by building up her confidence.

"I'm not trying to scare her, I'm stating a fact. She's the safest of us all."

"Stop it!" Mike snarls. Then Dustin pops his head out from the other side of Lucas to ask in a hushed voice,

"Do you think El can fly the plane?"

"Shut up you guys!"

"Ok, but El, maybe you could float some peanuts this way?"

Mike and Lucas continue to argue and Dustin gets dragged in, while the poor businessman stuck between the window and Dustin becomes convinced that he's sitting next to a group of lunatics. El feels almost worse - her friends are fighting because of her, it's her fault, it's her fault. She always blames herself first, a habit she'll never be able to shake.

Luckily, Will returns from the bathroom and intervenes, making El and Mike scoot over to the window (mostly to separate Mike and Lucas). He pulls out his sketchbook and starts a lively game of hangman. Mike calms down and gets silly which in turn calms Eleven until her knuckles have returned to their normal hue and her giggles can be heard throughout the plane.

And somehow, by the end of the flight, Dustin ends up with three extra packages of peanuts.

II.

They stay with Nancy, Jonathan and Steve, a decent-sized one bedroom apartment. After hugs and shouts and smiles, Steve recruits Dustin and Lucas to help carry up food from the Chinese restaurant downstairs and they sit around the coffee table munching and chatting and laughing until late. The boys insist on El taking the couch and pile together on the floor amidst blankets and pillows. They always feel safest amongst each other, the sound of each other's breaths lulling them to sleep.

Jonathan makes pancakes in the morning and puts their battered coffee maker to good use. El is presented with her own special plate of Eggos which he had picked up just for her. The elder three get ready to start their workdays.

Nancy, now halfway through medical school, has been interning at one of the local hospitals over the summer. Jonathan has been working with a new breakout artist (Nancy and Steve find him to be insane) and waiting tables at night. Steve, after several odd jobs and some general ennui, has finally found a vocation he loves. That morning he asks,

"So you guys wanna go to work with me today?"

III.

And that's how they find themselves sitting on the top of a tour bus in Manhattan, Steve's charming voice telling stories and jokes over the microphone.

The five of them sit across the back row, El in one corner, craning her head all around to see the tops of buildings and the people on the streets below them. She can't get over the sheer enormity of this place, never-ending, never still. Mike sits next to her, and she pokes him every so often to point out the more interesting sights. Lucas is in the middle, pretending to be underwhelmed by the whole thing, because he "lives in Chicago now, you know," which the others tease him endlessly about. Will is on his other side, eyes peeled, fingers itching to draw everything, feet begging to walk the streets. And then there's Dustin, leaning over the opposite corner, clothed in a brand new I Heart NY t-shirt and Yankees hat and holding a small American flag.

"Do you have to carry that around? You're American! You've always lived in America," Lucas asks, utterly embarrassed by Dustin's newfound love of NYC.

"Lucas, I'm embracing my heritage. I am America. New York is America!" He replies as he waves his flag around, Will completely ignoring the both of them.

"Since when do you like New York so much?" Lucas raises his voice, arms waving around in irritation.

"Since now! I want the sights, I want the sounds, I want hot dogs at midnight!" His voice gets louder and louder until he's standing up shouting with his flag high in the air.

"Excuse me, sir, I need you to remain seated," Steve says from the front with a wink. Dustin flops back down with a grin and Lucas drops his head into his hands, groaning.

IV.

The next day they decide to venture out on their own, armed with maps and excitement. They tromp all over, midtown to downtown, Battery Park to Central Park, hot dog stand to hot dog stand ("Dustin, can we please eat anywhere else?"). Dusk has fallen and their feet are sore and they want nothing more than to stretch out at the apartment. They just have to get there.

"Guys, I swear the map says to go this way," Dustin says as he examines the map in his hands. They've spent the last hour in circles, lost, and are starting to get testy with one another.

"Dustin, this is an alley. Is this even on the map?" Mike asks in exasperation. But then El tugs sharply on his hand, sending a wave of panic through his arm. There's a man here, standing before them.

"Wallets. Now."

Mike steps in front of the group and raises his hands slowly. "Hey, man, calm down."

But then Mike's staring down the end of a gun and he feels a steely cold in the pit of his stomach. This isn't a little girl pointing her fingers, this is a real gun. He hears Dustin's gasp and there's an icy mix of fear and rage that he swears he feels in the air.

He locks eyes with the man but then they both stare as the latter's hand slowly raises the gun toward the sky. Suddenly he flies back and hits the wall, held there screaming as his fingers break and the gun drops. He's sprinting down the alley as soon as he's let go. The boys look at El, but she ignores them, a small trickle of blood below her nose. She turns and walks back to the street, the boys trailing after her like ducklings. They never forget about her powers, but they're still amazed every time.

They stuff themselves into the nearest cab, and Lucas and Dustin concoct a story of how they fought off the mugger with just a little assistance from Eleven.

V.

On the last night they crawl through the window and up the fire escape to the roof, bottles of cheap wine and plastic cups in their hands. The city lights serve as their stars and they listen to the bits of conversation from the passerby on the street below. They look out at the other buildings, the wine loosening their tongues and sharing their hopes and desires and thoughts on life. There is a thread that ties them together and they all know it - no one will ever understand them quite this way.

Nancy's heart is full as she looks at them, her favorite people in her favorite place. She'll stay here forever, graduating from medical school, becoming a doctor and eventually working at Sloan-Kettering. She'll keep her boys close, even when they add two little ones and move to an outer borough.

Will feels comfortable and alive in the city and will chase this feeling until he moves there. He'll bop around, living in the East Village, then Alphabet City and eventually Brooklyn. He'll finally feel that there's enough air to breathe, space to roam, the beauty of anonymity in a big city. He'll date a string of guys until he meets one he'll bring home, one he'll keep forever. One he'll marry at City Hall the first moment they can, one he'll raise a child with, one he'll look at and think "how did I ever live without you?"

The others will think of this trip fondly whenever they visit, when they walk under streetlights, when they (Dustin) buy souvenir shirts, when they hold nephews, when they meet new friends and see new homes.

18. Skating

September 1988

It's Friday night after a long week, and all Michael Wheeler feels like doing is being alone with Eleven. The boys had asked him to come to the movies with them and a group from their science club at school, but he begged off, claiming a prior engagement. Dustin and Lucas rolled their eyes and made kissing noises but he only had to lightly punch them three times before they drove off.

There's nothing wrong with going to the movies of course, but he sees those people all week at school and El only in the afternoons.

There's a lake not too far from the tracks, although pond might be a more appropriate term. It's not popular like the larger one across town, but the privacy is Mike's favorite part.

It's the last warm patch of the year before fall really starts and they kick off their shoes and stretch out on the grass, El closing her eyes, Mike playing with her hair as they talk about school, their friends, the new tv show they like.

They're seventeen and young and this is what they should be doing. Not worrying about possibly possessed friends or fighting off government agents.

"Remember when you took me skating here?" El asks after a lull in the conversation. Mike scoffs in reply, untangling his fingers from her hair as she sits up and stretches her arms.

"Yeah, I fell on my butt and I was supposed to be the one teaching you."

"You were fine. I liked it."

"Yeah. I kinda wish we could skate right now."

"We could."

She's feeling mischievous and he sees it in her eyes.

"What are you talking about?"

She sweetly shrugs and tells him, "Stand up."

He hesitates, but then pulls himself up to stand before her. He trusts her, trusts her in everything. He's about to ask her why he's there when he feels light and realizes that his feet have lifted off the ground. He's floating, mere inches above the grass, but floating all the same. "Woah."

She smirks and pushes him gently to the shore until he's hovering above the water. "See? Skating."

"Are you gonna be okay? This must be a lot." Ever Mike, ever the same, concerned about her powers' effect on her health.

"I had a big lunch." True, she had leftover roast beef sandwiches with his mother as they discussed El's literature lessons.

"Well, if you're sure...why aren't you out here with me?" His smirk matches hers, maybe even bigger.

She giggles before jumping nimbly up and floating herself to his side, her toes skimming the water. No blood yet, she's gotten stronger. Grabbing his hands, she pulls him further out, moving her legs as if skating on ice. Mike mimes skating tricks to both their amusement.

They're laughing and a hint of blood has started to appear under her nose when suddenly her face scrunches up.

And she sneezes.

Splash.

"Oops."

El stands waist-deep in the water looking down at Mike, who fell upon landing and is completely soaked. She valiantly tries to hold back her smile, but is losing the battle.

"You're lucky you're so pretty. Help me up?" he asks, reaching out his arm, hoping that she hasn't seen this one before. And she hasn't. She

grabs his hand and is pulled down with him, Mike catching her in the water. "We really need to clean the blood off your face."

She laughs and escapes his arms, and a splash war ensues until they're both thoroughly beat.

Later, after they've returned to the grass and wrapped themselves in a blanket from the car in an attempt to dry themselves and kissed a while in an attempt to warm up, Mike asks,

"Will you take me flying?"

"Someday."

They're seventeen and young and this is what they should be doing.

19. These Words, They Carry Meaning

October 1987

It's just over a year between Mike's first I-love-you and Eleven's. He's used the words sparingly. After a nightmare. Cleaning up a skinned knee. When the fall breeze makes her hair dance. He's rationed them out, but they run through his mind constantly. So far she's never uttered the words but she lets him say it, and right now that's enough for him.

Unbeknownst to them, there's been a quiet war going on behind the scenes, amongst their family and friends who find them curious. Joyce, Karen, Lucas and Dustin are on the side of "why don't they make it official?" while Jonathan, Nancy, and Will are "why do there need to be labels?" There are various third parties, Holly representing "my brother is gross," Ted with "huh, my son with a (definitely not Russian) girl," Brian with "animal crackers," and Hopper with "why does there need to be anything going on at all?"

If Mike were seeing any other girl, the boys would grill him for details, but El is their friend, sister, and they mostly let them be. Except for a bit of teasing. They just can't help themselves, Mike blushes so easily.

While everyone else has been discussing the status of their relationship, Mike and Eleven haven't worried themselves about it. It is what it is. There are no words that seem to adequately describe it. But love - that word has been on Eleven's mind for a while now.

Words are heavy with meaning for her, a girl whose vocabulary was so limited she had never learned the word "friend" until she was twelve. Words are important, and she's always careful about hers. That's why she's been hesitant to reply. Who is she to know what love is?

There's a bond there, a thread connecting them, different than with anyone else. Perhaps that's what love is. She would miss him the most of anyone. Perhaps that's what love is. She would fight until her fingers turned to bone, until she bled out completely, if only to save

him. Perhaps that's what love is.

The first time she felt her heart burst with a feeling that could be love, she was lying half-dead on a middle school science table. And here they are, back in a school, the high school this time, men in suits with guns and shadowy, wet creatures crawling the halls and the boys clutching makeshift weapons.

It's been a long few days, filled with fear and betrayals and blood, and a longer couple years of watching Will waste away into himself. And while her mind has been racing with everything, 'I love you' has been popping up more and more this week.

She thinks it when she comes out of a panic attack to see Mike's eyes and feel his hands holding hers. She thinks it when he finally lets himself cry after managing to sound brave and stoic on the phone with Nancy. She thinks it when he screams at Hopper, angry for her, angry for Will, the only time she's ever seen the man look scared of a mere boy.

And then one time she doesn't just think it, she says it. They're hiding in a broom closet near the gym, waiting for Lucas and Dustin as agreed upon. She's holding his wrist to keep herself from shaking and feels his pulse under her fingers, such a weak thing but strong, his whole life-force. She hopes it never stops. She won't let it stop. And then she blurts out, "I love you."

He whips his head down to look at her in the dim light, eyes wide, the old spiked bat still in his hand, blood and goo dripping from it.

"Yeah?" He whispers.

"Yeah." She nods. The smile that spreads over his weary face is beautiful, a bright spot in the dark.

Later, once the whole ordeal's over, she'll reiterate it, make him understand that it wasn't just in the heat of the moment. She won't know that her declaration gave him a much-needed spark when he was so tired, so scared, so close to losing. She'll just know that they will both use the words more and more as time matches on.

20. Four Weddings (No Funerals)

I. June 1988

Eleven attends her first wedding in 1988. She receives an invitation in the mail with her very own name on it, entirely separate from the one for Will and the one for Joyce and Hopper.

"You are invited to the wedding of Scott Clarke and Jennifer Colby," she reads aloud and Joyce seems excited for her so she decides to be excited too.

It's a standard church wedding, community hall reception. All the boys attend as well, pulling at their suits throughout the ceremony and dinner, unused to such confining clothes. El has a new pink dress, simple but with a swishy skirt that delights her. They're all a little nervous and awkward, a little like being at a school dance. Except for the fact that they're the only teens there.

But then the music starts and Dustin is quick to the dance floor, displaying his signature goofy moves. El joins him immediately, dragging Will with her and Mike follows, finally convincing Lucas to get up. He dances the best of them all.

They collapse back in their chairs for the cake-cutting, flushed and smiley. El watches the couple mash cake into each other's mouth with confusion and delight. The bride and groom stop by their table to chat and the new Mrs. Clarke gushes over how much their old teacher talks about them, how proud.

Mr. Clarke, tipsy, jokes to Mike that they'll be next and the boy burns bright red. El simply smiles; she never learned to be embarrassed about such things. Thankfully Hopper is on the other side of the room grabbing his and Joyce's coats so they can relieve Jonathan of babysitting duty.

Later the kids all pile into Dustin's car and go to McDonald's at midnight for snacks. They sit in the parking lot under the stars and street lamps and rehash the day's events. Will dunks his fries in his milkshake which Lucas teases him about. El doesn't think she's ever

seen Mike so attractive, nursing a vanilla shake in his disheveled suit, tie loosened and jacket long gone. Dustin catches her staring at her whatever-he-is and waggles his eyebrows, causing her to throw a McNugget at him. Neither one explains why they're laughing so much when the others question them.

Eleven decides she likes weddings.

II. January 1990

Jim Hopper isn't usually one for New Year's resolutions or any of that nonsense. The midnight kiss is fun but that's about all he cares to partake in with the new year. But something about this one is getting to him. Perhaps it's the new decade. He looks back to 1980 and can't believe how different it was. Living alone. No kids. A whole lot of pills. Not to mention no knowledge of inter-dimensional travel. In many ways the decade was tough but boy, wasn't it also wonderful?

And so, in celebration of a new decade (and also the fact that he's even alive for it), Hopper decides to do something he should have done years ago.

Jonathan and Will both come home for the holidays and on a sunny December day when Joyce takes Brian to the grocery store, he sits them both down with a serious face. Eleven is included as well, mostly because the girl can't stand to be left out of any family activities. The boys look a bit apprehensive but she eagerly curls up in the corner of the couch; she loves family meetings (the one regarding Hop and Joyce's smoking habit was a particular favorite of hers). Hopper stuffs his hands in his pockets and clears his throats before speaking.

"I know I've been here a while, and I know I'm part of the family and all, but... your mom means a great deal to me. The greatest deal, to be honest. I love her very much and I want to marry her. And it would mean a lot to me if you would give me your blessing. You're the main guys - sorry, El, people - in her life. I want your approval on this." There's a lump forming in his throat but he would rather die than let the kids know.

El's eyes widen as she looks to Will - she isn't sure what to say but of

course he and Joyce should get married. It makes all the sense in the world to her. Will grins and feels warm inside thinking of this man who became his dad, who saved his life more than once, who's loved his mom for years now and makes her happy. Hopper can tell these two have already jumped on board but he's really waiting for Jonathan's verdict - he's the eldest, the original, Joyce's very first favorite boy. Jonathan slowly smiles and stands to shake Hopper's hand. "If you didn't ask her, I'd think less of you."

Hopper feels relieved until he realizes he still has to propose. Too nervous to wait and having already bought the ring, he decides that today's the day. When Joyce returns from the store, the kids grab Brian and take off for the Wheelers'. She can tell something's up - their voices are off, they're just a little too frantic. She looks at Hopper with a raised brow.

He'd originally planned a whole speech in his head. Now that he's actually here in front of her he forgets the whole script and stammers.

"Ah, um..."

"Jim, what's going on?"

"Well, see, I was doing some thinking and... I've loved you for so long. It's weird that you're not my wife" - Joyce's mouth opens in surprise - "Because... well, because you're everything to me. And uh, well you know I'm no good with words and I think you know where I'm going with this so-" He pulls out the ring and looks at her, then quickly kneels, almost as an afterthought. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes, yes of course." She nods with a smile and he stands to kiss her deeply before adding,

"And we've been living in sin for how many years now. Brian might wanna be legitimate."

"Shut up, Jim," she says in a mock-serious tone as she lightly punches his shoulder. But then she looks up at his eyes and it's clear how happy she is. He wants to say, it should have been you. And sometimes he thinks that. But he knows it's not true. They wouldn't

give up those past lives for anything. And he would never desecrate the memory of Sarah.

Neither one wants a traditional wedding - they've both done that before. Hopper stood in a stuffy suit at an altar, danced at a large reception and thought that now his life would finally be happy. Joyce wore a long white dress that just hid her growing belly, laughed at Lonnie's jokes during the ceremony and wondered if it was normal to be more excited about an unexpected baby than her own wedding. They decide on a quiet ceremony at the courthouse, just days into January while everyone is still at home. It's limited to Byers-Hoppers only - El pouts when Mike is sent home and for some reason Dustin is the most offended at not being invited.

"I've been there since the beginning! C'mon, the sensory deprivation pool?"

"Dustin, I think it started before that..."

The kids all cook a special dinner and Jonathan lights candles. Joyce looks at Jim, at the whole table, and her heart feels so full it could burst.

III. August 1996

About a week after Dustin meets Christy Sanders, at the beginning of junior year at Caltech, he decides he's going to marry her. Granted, he makes that decision based on her favorite movie being *The Empire Strikes Back*, but it's not the last time he thinks about it. Four years and 287 thoughts of marriage later, he finally asks her.

He saves for ages for a ring and agonizes the whole time about how he'll propose. His brothers both proposed at fancy restaurants but Dustin feels like that's stale. Lucas and Will are no help, and Mike just says that Eleven did all the work for him. El advises over the phone to not worry about it - she didn't and it all worked out. But while that might have been fine for them ("We all knew you two were getting married the day you put on that pink dress"), Dustin feels a need to impress Christy. He knows deep down that she'll say yes, that she loves him the way he is, but he can't help but be insecure sometimes.

He grew up the youngest of four, his brothers class clowns but popular, his sister pretty and outgoing, and him, the baby, trying to get his parents' attention. He was always keenly aware of his status as a nerd and while he loved his friends, he sometimes wished it was easier to talk to girls. For all of his tries over the years, his first girlfriend wasn't until freshman year of college. Christy is smart and funny, with blonde hair and apple cheeks and Dustin doesn't deserve her. (She thinks he's kind and strong and hilarious and wouldn't trade him for the world.)

In the end, he proposes with fireworks. Her parents live in San Diego now and he decides that the beach near their house is the perfect location when they're down there for a family gathering. Assuring her brothers that he doesn't need any help, he gets everything into place himself. However, when it comes to actually setting them off, he fails completely and they explode on the sand, covering him in soot.

Christy tries to hold in laughter at the sight of his dirty face. Dustin clenches at his hair and shakes his head in frustration.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I just wanted it to be perfect. You don't propose every day and-"

"Wait," she interrupts, "this is a proposal?"

"Uhh, yeah."

"Oh my god. Oh my god." Her eyes go wide and he panics, starting to pace as is his habit.

"I knew it. I knew it! You weren't gonna say yes. I'm so stupid..."

"Dustin, shut up. Just ask me."

Dustin looks at her in bewilderment. "You want me to ask you?"

"Yes, dummy, ask me!" She says with an affectionate roll of her eyes.

He quickly kneels in front of her and wrenches the box out of his pocket to present it to her.

"Christine Cornelia Sanders-"

"My middle name isn't Cornelia."

"Christine Gertrude Sanders!"

"Dustin, you know what my name is."

"Christine Ann Sanders, will you marry me?"

She nods enthusiastically with just a hint of tears in her eyes. "Yes!"

He stands with a smile and she brushes the soot off his nose before kissing him.

They hold the wedding in San Diego, a large affair as Christy is also from a big family. Dustin picks Lucas as his best man, claiming that he needs him close by in case he needs a good punch. In reality, Dustin has always thought of Lucas as his oldest friend, the first one to talk to him when he moved to town, the one who invited him to a sleepover with the other guys.

The gang flies into sunny California, donning sunglasses under the palm trees. Lucas brings his new girlfriend, Tiffany, who's friendly and up for anything. It's loud and raucous and fun, oh so fun. Long after the bride and groom have made their exit, the Hawkins group finds itself watching the sunrise at the beach, seals bleating in the distance.

IV. October 2012

When Holly's boyfriend of three years proposes, Karen Wheeler finally gets the big wedding she always wanted for her children. She and Holly meticulously plan for a year and everyone, especially those with the last name Wheeler, is ready for the day to arrive.

Holly and Jesse get married in Hawkins and Wheeler Mania (as Steve and Jonathan have been calling it) has descended upon the town. Nancy's family stays on Maple Street so the maid of honor can be close at hand, much to her sons' delight. Mike and his family stay out at the Byers-Hopper house, although the atmosphere there isn't much better.

Mike has spent the morning of the wedding in a frazzled state,

running last minute errands for his mom, fielding texts from his sisters and trying to keep a smile on everyone's faces. Presently that last task has proven the most difficult as his nine-year-old is throwing a fit over her dress and his thirteen-year-old is acting as if she's headed to prison.

"Audrey, come on, let's go. Go change. We need to leave in 15 minutes," Mike says as he stands in the living room working on his cufflinks. He jealously thinks of how Joyce and Hopper ducked out early to avoid all this.

"Daaaad," Audrey whines from the chair in the corner where she's dramatically slouching. "Seriously. I don't wanna go. I didn't even want to come here this weekend. Mia's having a birthday party and I'm the only one who's missing it."

"Your cousins will be there. Weren't you glad to see them last night?"

"So what? Nicky will still be showing off his three facial hairs and Evan is so shy he barely talks to me. I'll see them next month at Thanksgiving anyway."

"Audrey, if you don't change right now we're going to walk in halfway through the ceremony and I'll tell everyone it was your fault."

She rolls her eyes and slowly makes her way to the bathroom, feet dragging behind her.

Mike rubs his temples - he can't handle teenage angst right now. Walking down the hall, he finds El in the boys' old room, already put together in a navy shift and working on dressing Daniel. Tess is lying on the top bunk reading an old copy of Nancy Drew. Mike narrows his eyes as he sees the dress she's supposed to be wearing still on its hanger.

"Tess? Why aren't you dressed yet?"

"Mommy said I can wear my overalls," Tess informs him with a somewhat devious smile. Mike shoots a glance at El, trying to convey the word "traitor" with his eyes before turning back to his daughter.

"Tess, Aunt Holly is going to be so sad you didn't wear the dress she picked out for you."

"I don't want to! I don't like it, I don't like dresses, I don't want to!" Her face gets red as she glares at her dad.

El, still kneeling next to Daniel, adds, "She's not comfortable in the dress. She doesn't have to wear it."

Mike turns to her with a wild look in his eyes. "You don't get it. My mom's gonna flip. She's insane - she's driving Holly up the wall. This is the project of her life. Everything has to be perfect."

El doesn't even look up, concentrating on Daniel's tie. "She'll be fine. You're such a mama's boy sometimes."

Mike opens his mouth but simply closes it again, not able to think of a good retort. He leans against the doorjamb and sighs. "This is terrible - no one is happy today."

"Nonsense, Daniel is very excited for his job. Aren't you, Danny?"

The four-year-old nods seriously, his little hands clutching the pillow for the rings. He beams at himself in the mirror as his mom finishes tying his bow tie. She kisses his head before pulling Mike into the hall.

"Michael, since when are you so afraid of your mother?"

"Hey, she can be scary!"

"Everyone's parents can be scary sometimes," she replies with a quirk of her lips.

"Oh please, Joyce and Hopper let you get away with everything. All you had to do was give them puppy eyes."

El ignores this bit - it's absolutely true but not relevant at the moment. She gently grabs his arm and gives him a concerned look.

"Mike, seriously, what's going on?"

He places a hand over his eyes and sighs. "It's just... Holly's my baby sister. She's always been my baby sister. And now she's getting married. It's... weird. And all I can think about is that someday before we know it I'll be walking Audrey down an aisle and she won't be a little girl anymore. Or even this sulky teenager we have right now."

El's heart is warm and she smiles as she says, "You're a wonderful father."

Mike understands what she means, understands all that she's not saying, and hugs her tightly. She whispers, "And anyway, Tess will probably be the first to get married."

He groans. "Yeah. Probably to some schmuck when she's 18."

"Maybe in Vegas," she adds with raised eyebrows as she pulls away to find her shoes. He follows, feeling a little bit lighter.

The rest of the day is smooth and happy and fun. Mike clenches his jaw but says nothing when his mother gapes at Tess' attire. Daniel walks proudly down the aisle, never missing a step. Audrey hits it off with one of Jesse's cousins, a boy her age, and decides she doesn't mind it here so much after all. Mike notices and sends Nicky to run interference. El rolls her eyes and pulls her husband onto the dance floor, if only so he'll leave their daughter alone.

As they dance to a slower number, he asks, "Do you remember Mr. Clarke's wedding?"

She smiles and presses her head against his shoulder. "Always."

21. Lemonade

July 1986

It all starts when Karen asks Mike to watch Holly each day that week. Well, tells Mike is more accurate. She's helping with a charity drive at the Y and Ted's at work. With Nancy out of town for her summer internship, that leaves Mike. And with Mike come El, Will, Lucas and Dustin.

Monday goes smoothly enough, racing bikes with Holly around the cul de sac and covering the sidewalk in chalk. Tuesday they get too ambitious and take Holly to the local pool. It's a disaster - completely overrun by little kids and their harried mothers. Wednesday brings rain and is spent watching cartoons and playing Candyland. But Thursday is also rainy and cabin fever sets in. Six-year-old Holly is full of energy but too old to be told to run around the house until she's spent. They're lying around the living room flipping channels when the weatherman tells them that tomorrow will be "sunny and hot hot hot".

Lucas thanks the man as if he's God and Mike is struck with an idea.

"Holly, do you want to have a lemonade stand tomorrow?"

Her eyes light up so quickly that they all laugh. "Yeah, I think she does."

"Oh, Mikey, Mikey, yes! Yes!" She exclaims, jumping up and clapping her hands.

Mike chuckles. "Well, we've got a lot of planning to do then."

The rest of the rainy afternoon is spent preparing. Prices are discussed. Signs are drawn. Lists are made. Karen gladly drives Mike to the grocery store that evening, delighted with the effort he's making.

The next morning, once Ted and Karen have left and the boys (and El) have arrived, they test some recipes. Dustin's is too sour, Will's too

watery, Mike's WAY too sweet ("Mikey, you're not allowed to make any.") Lucas' is delicious, the perfect ratio. He smiles smugly as Holly drinks two Dixie cups' worth in a row. But Eleven surprises them all with her concoction.

"Woah, this is...spicy!"

"I don't know why, but I really love this."

"El, what did you put in here?"

El holds up a little jar of cayenne with a smirk. They decide to serve both Lucas' and El's recipes.

They flip over old milk crates to use as a table and pull out lawn chairs from the garage. Holly perches on the edge of a chair and leans on the makeshift table - she's all business. The others are content to lounge back and soak in the sun. Except for Dustin, who wears a sandwich board that he fashioned for himself, Will's graceful lettering reading:

FRESH LEMONADE 10 CENTS

SPECIAL LEMONADE 15 CENTS

Underneath Dustin has scrawled "Jokes Complimentary". Lucas rolls his eyes and asks why that's even necessary.

"Because, Lucas, the jokes keep 'em coming back. We have to retain our customers!"

"Well, my lemonade is all we need to retain customers."

Dustin walks down the street and they can hear his shouts even as he goes - "Lemonade, lemonade, get your lemonade! One day only folks! Come on, get your lemonade! Holly's lemonade, only 10 cents!"

Jonathan is their first customer of the day, on his way to his shift at the diner. He makes sure to snap a photo of the group, Holly beaming in the middle.

Maybe ten minutes later, Steve strolls by. "Well, fancy meeting you

here," he drawls as he lifts his wayfarers to wink at them.

"We live here," Holly responds in total deadpan. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't a guy just go for a walk on a beautiful day?"

Holly doesn't question him further as he drinks two regular lemonades and one spicy before sauntering off.

Soon a police car drives up and stops, Hopper looking out from the driver's seat.

"Well, what do we have here? Lemonade? I sure am thirsty, aren't you, Officer Callahan?"

"No, chief, I'm fine."

Hopper smiles wider as he gets out of the vehicle. "Officer Callahan, I insist."

"No, really, I just had three coffees."

"Callahan, get your ass over here and buy a damn lemonade," Hopper growls and El covers Holly's ears while the boys snicker. The officer rushes over and is suckered into two cups.

Joyce drives over on her break, thanking Holly profusely for the refreshment. Various neighbors stop by throughout the afternoon and Hopper (and Callahan) return three times ("Seriously, chief, I'm so full."). By 3 o'clock their supply has run out and Holly ends up with \$4.45 (half of which is from the police force).

The boys are feeling pretty proud of themselves afterwards, once they've cleaned up and sprawled around the living room. That is, until Holly, curled up against El in the La-Z-Boy and half-asleep, looks up and asks, "Mikey?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we do it again tomorrow?"

22. Home

August 1984

Eleven can't sleep. And while she's used to waking up from nightmares, this is different. No, this isn't nightmares, more like an anxiety that has been brewing inside her all week. It's been not quite a month since she returned and she's realized that she now has to figure out what to do next. She hadn't planned this far ahead. Yes, she had imagined Eggo's and a warm bed and whatever the Snowball was, but they were just vague images that she had held onto in order to survive. Now that she's here...now what? She hasn't brought it up to the boys because they are already planning out everything. And she's grateful for that, but she wants to do something herself. She wants to take care of herself. She's done that already, hasn't she? Hasn't she? She clawed her own way back from another world. But she still has something to prove. She doesn't want to be a burden. As she stares up from her bed, the ceiling feels like it's lowering on her. She escapes to the living room for a fresh location. Hank continues to snore next to her bed.

But once she's out in the hall she notices the dim light in the kitchen and, creeping closer, sees Joyce sitting at the table, poking at a calculator and sighing. El isn't sure why, but she can tell Joyce is worried. She feels it in the air. Before she can turn and pad back into her room, the older woman looks over with a smile.

"Hey kiddo," she says softly, eyes crinkling. "Can't sleep?"

El shuffles her feet and shakes her head. She likes Joyce, but she's still not sure how to act around adults. Will she be in trouble for leaving her room so late?

"That's okay. You know what I like to do when I can't sleep?"

"What?" Joyce barely hears the whisper and her heart breaks at the girl's frightened eyes.

"I like to curl up in a big blanket on the couch and watch an old movie. Does that sound nice?"

El feels lighter and she nods with a small smile. Minutes later she's tucked under her favorite quilt and Joyce is playing an old musical for them. She likes the bright colors and the happy songs and dancing feet. Joyce makes popcorn and crawls under the quilt, holding up her arm for El to sneak under.

Eleven is still a little skittish when it comes to touch. The boys will give her quick and clumsy hugs and Mike has gently held her hand a few times, but otherwise she'll flinch if Jonathan or Nancy or Hopper approach her too quickly. Except for Joyce. With her, the girl found comfort instantaneously. Joyce is soft and warm and her hugs feel like home. This is what Papa should have been. His arms were cold, stiff, a prison. Nothing good came from him. El is interrupted from her thoughts by a gentle flick on her nose and looks up to see Joyce smiling at her.

"You doing okay, sweetie?"

And El grins and snuggles in closer, watching the movie until her eyelids grow heavy and eventually close. She's safe here. She's home.

23. Friendship

November 1988

It's been five years. Half a decade since their lives irrevocably changed, though they would all agree it was for the better. But there's still pain in those memories...Will's nightmares of a cold, dark world; Dustin's recurring dream of his new friend shattering before him; the ache Mike still feels of looking for Eleven those long months; Lucas' deep, dark fear that nothing he does will be enough to save his friends; the nagging guilt that El will never be able to shake, that she is truly the monster, that she will be the end of them. So, as they do every year, they make little mention of it.

They had been planning on their annual walk of the tracks, but their showdown with Troy ruins that. And none of them feel enough courage to put it into words, to express that something monumental has happened. So they keep on as normal.

That's not good enough for Eleven, though, whose world has changed the most, who can still remember how the cold tile felt against her perpetually bare feet.

She goes over to the Wheeler house most afternoons, getting a basic cooking lesson from Karen before tucking into a book or two for a few hours until Holly returns from school. The eight-year-old is still in love with El, and relishes the time she gets to have her all to herself, before her brother comes home. They'll paint each other's nails or cover the sidewalks in chalk or climb the trees in the backyard or practice their cursive.

Holly learned how to make friendship bracelets in art class and has been excitedly teaching El her new skills. Eleven is a quick learner, as always, and soon her nimble fingers fly as they weave the threads together. When the blonde explains that the girls in her class trade them, El decides it's perfect way to commemorate the anniversary: small, subtle, meaningful. She makes one for each of the boys - shades of green for Lucas, red and white for Dustin, bright oranges and yellows for Will, and soft blues for Mike. She makes a matching bracelet for each one, stacking them on her left wrist to cover her old

tattoo.

When she finally presents her gifts to the boys, right before Thanksgiving, they can see the tentative excitement in her smile. Her eyes shine. She tells them they don't have to wear the bracelets, and she doesn't really expect them to, but she feels a swell of pride and love when she sees Dustin's on the zipper of his jacket and Lucas' on the handle of his backpack. When she finds Will's intertwined in the spiral of his favorite sketchbook. When she holds Mike's hand and the bracelet on his wrist brushes against the matching one on hers.

24. Holly-ween

October 1988

"I can't believe we have to escort your baby sister."

"Lucas, you volunteered to come with. I didn't even invite you."

El peeks out at the bickering boys from the basement bathroom to chime in. "Oh please, you love having an excuse to go trick-or-treating again."

Lucas scoffs and falters in his reply. "Yeah, well...this is all your fault anyway. Can I get in there and use the mirror already?"

A week ago El had been at the Wheeler house, munching on pumpkin cookies while finishing *Leaves of Grass*, when she heard raised voices in the kitchen. At eight years old, all Holly wanted to do was go trick-or-treating by herself with her friends, but the disappearances of Will and Barb still rang out strongly in Karen's head and she was not about to let three little girls run around unchaperoned at night, even if it was a holiday. But as she got older, Holly was also getting sassier. Thankfully, a soft and sweet voice interrupted from the doorway.

"What if Mike and I take you?" El asked as she leaned against the doorjamb. Holly's eyes lit up and she practically jumped into Eleven's arms.

"Oh would you? Mama, please?"

Karen paused, considering the offer. "You're sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not." El shrugged. "It's an excuse to dress up."

"Well, all right then. Problem solved." Holly danced around the kitchen in glee and Karen tried to convey her gratitude with a look.

Mike wasn't totally enthused when his girlfriend informed him of their Halloween plans - he and the boys had been planning on a horror movie marathon - but he quickly acquiesced to her puppy

eyes. And from there it wasn't long until the other boys decided to join in.

And now the day has come, and the gang is in the basement putting the finishing touches on their outfits while waiting for Holly and her friends to get ready upstairs. Will sits at the table, adding smears of paint to his artist's palette to complete his Bob Ross costume. Mike's set with his costume but is hurriedly trying to finish his calculus homework before they have to leave. He and El are dressed as Wesley and Buttercup from *The Princess Bride*. Neither has the right hair color, but due to her longtime refusal to cut her hair (which kills Nancy), El's locks are long enough to rival the princess's. At Lucas's request, she flounces out of the bathroom with a sly smile and he gives a sassy look in return as he passes her. He needs to apply the fake blood.

"Yes!" Mike raises his arms in triumph before putting his finished homework away. "What's taking Dustin so long?"

"Yeah, why didn't he just get ready here?" El asks as she sprawls along the couch.

Will shrugs. "He said he wants it to be a surprise."

"Surprise? He does the same costume every year!" Lucas yells from the bathroom.

"Yeah, I know, so practice your surprised face."

Soon Karen is calling down for them to come up to the kitchen, where they find Holly and her two friends dressed as Jem and the Holograms, with bright wigs and makeup.

Holly coos when she sees El. "Oh you look so pretty! Doesn't she, guys?" She asks her friends. Casey, sitting at the table with her blonde hair tucked under a pink wig, shrugs unenthusiastically. Karen's and El's eyes meet over the island and they try not to smile. Casey has had a crush on Mike for years and therefore does not care for his girlfriend.

"Oh, Will, your costume is great!" Karen says, while passing out

treats.

Holly looks up at Lucas, cocking her head to the side. "What are you supposed to be?"

He pretends to be insulted and holds up his fake gun. "Are you serious? I'm John McClane."

Mike snorts at him. "You really think Holly went and saw *Die Hard* this summer?"

"Well I think it looks great," Stephanie, Holly's other friend, says, batting her eyelashes at Lucas. Will and El try to hide their giggles while Lucas uncomfortably shuffles to the other side of the room. Luckily they're interrupted by the front door opening and a large hairy beast stumbling into the hall.

"Sorry I took so long, guys!"

"Are you Bigfoot?" Casey asks, narrowing her eyes.

Dustin's jaw drops and Lucas can't contain his laughter. "No! I'm Chewbacca, duh!"

"You do that every year!" Holly laughs.

"It's tradition!" Dustin doesn't notice as Mike and Lucas mouth along with him.

The girls are anxious to get started, so Karen herds everyone into the living room for photos before handing out their Halloween bags. Holly and Stephanie lead the group, skipping down the sidewalk. El pulls Will up with her, leaving poor Mike with Casey. Lucas and Dustin bring up the rear, still squabbling over their costumes. Everyone seems to be in good spirits and the neighbors are generous with their candy, even to the teenagers.

At the end of the neighborhood stands a small apartment building, in fair shape. Holly goes right up to one of the doors on the first floor and knocks. The door quickly opens to reveal a man with voluminous, tousled hair, dressed in all black.

"Hi, Steve!" Holly chirps, her friends quickly forgetting their teenage crushes.

Steve runs a hand through his hair and smiles. "Well don't you ladies look lovely tonight!"

He looks past them to see the older kids and smirks. "What are you supposed to be, Henderson? Yogi Bear?"

"Oh my god, I'm Chewbacca! What is wrong with you people?"

Steve winks at the others as Dustin dramatically groans.

"Okay, Holly, what do you say?"

"Trick or treat!" The girls cheer as Steve dumps candy into their already-hefty bags. "Steve, who are you supposed to be?"

"Oh, you can't tell?" He pops his hips from side to side. "I'm Patrick Swayze. *Dirty Dancing*."

"Is Jonathan dressed as Baby?"

"Ugh, I wish! He's so boring, he didn't even dress up this year." Turning his head, he shouts down the hall, "Jon! Get out here. The mini-Wheelers are here!"

True to Steve's claim, Jonathan appears wearing his normal clothes. He notices the way everyone is frowning at him and sighs. "Steve, are you still going on about this? Why would I dress up? We're not even going anywhere."

"You're such a drag, Byers."

Sensing that this argument is far from over, El motions for the group to keep going. They can still hear the two bickering as they reach the sidewalk.

The girls start to tire on the way back, and after a while they stop going up to houses and simply head home, Holly riding on Mike's back. The gang spends the rest of the evening going through their candy while watching *Halloween*, grumbling about school the next

morning and goodnaturedly making fun of Dustin.

25. We'll Be Fine

March 1989

Snowflakes float down outside the library window and Eleven is tempted to breathe on the glass and draw figures in the fog. It's halfway through March but winter is still hanging in there. And while usually El would be itching for spring to finally arrive with the flower buds and warm breezes, this year she doesn't mind it. This year she wants everything to slow down.

College acceptance letters have been arriving all week. Dustin's been accepted to Caltech and all the boys got into IU. Jonathan is finally going to NYU. Lucas is eagerly awaiting an answer from Chicago and no one got into MIT. Mike should hear from Michigan today. He acts undecided but El knows he really wants Michigan, especially since MIT didn't work out.

And El will stay here. Not forever, but for now. She's studying to get her GED later this year and then someday, maybe someday, college courses of her own. And in the meantime... She looks around the room. The library is nice. Maybe she could work here.

She's not looking forward to missing any of her friends once they leave for school, but she's most anxious about Mike. Yes they'll talk on the phone and there will be photos and letters but it's not the same. Paper and technology are hard and cold, so different from the warmth and life of someone's presence. She remembers those days in the Upside Down, relying on memories of her friends to survive. It's not the same. What if she forgets those little things that can't be captured over the phone? The curve of Mike's jaw that she sees when she nestles her head on his shoulder. The way his freckles change depending on the light. The gentle touch of his breath when he whispers in her ear. The way his nose crinkles when he's thinking.

But she's more worried that he'll forget these things about her. What if he finally sees her for what she is, broken and deficient, a monster who could snap at any moment? Maybe he should.

When Mike gets home from school that afternoon, he finds El sitting in the dining room, a crisp white envelope sitting on the table before her.

"Is that...?"

"Michigan." She smiles.

He grabs it quickly but his fingers hesitate at the seal. This is one of those moments that create forks in your life and he's not sure if he's ready yet. But El is looking up at him with anticipation, so he slides his forefinger under the flap.

Dear Michael,

It is with great pleasure that I write to inform you that you have been accepted for admission to the University of Michigan as a member of the Class of 1993...

Accepted.

El must see the answer on his face because suddenly she's wrapping her arms around his waist and hugging him tightly. "Congratulations," she says into his chest, muffled by his sweater.

And he hugs her back and pretends he doesn't feel a wave of anxiety within all the excitement.

His parents are thrilled and even Holly is happy for him. El stays for dinner and afterward they end up on the couch in the basement, each working on assignments. The room is quiet, just the sounds of their breathing and pencils scratching against paper.

"This is nice," Mike says. El looks up with a smile but raises an eyebrow. "Being here, I mean, working down here with you. It's nice."

"I think it's nice too," she agrees, before turning back to her work. But Mike's not done.

"You know, it could be like this all the time next year if I go to IU."

She whips her head back up but he's looking away. "What?"

"If I go to IU...I could come home sometimes and study here, with you."

"Mike," she sighs and he knows what she's going to say. And he knows she's right. But still...he's a little scared. He wants to go to Michigan, he really does. But what if he can't make it there? What if he doesn't make any friends? And what if while he's away, El outgrows him, finally realizing all that the world has to offer? All the better there is out there than him.

"You have to go. You *want* to go. If it were me in your shoes, you wouldn't let me stay."

"Yeah." He nods. "You're right."

She stares at his profile and he stares at the floor and when he speaks again it's almost strained.

"What about us?" He's nervous; this is the closest they're ever come to a conversation about their relationship.

She flicks her eyes down to her hands, fingers tangling together.
"What *about* us?"

"What if you finally realize you don't need me?"

She snorts softly. "What if you meet a hundred girls you like better than me?"

She looks back up at him again with a laugh, but his brow is furrowed and he's looking at her so seriously that her smile vanishes.

"I will *always* want you."

"Me too," she replies, voice barely a whisper.

"Come here." He opens his arms and she crawls onto his lap, tucking her head into the crook of his neck.

"It'll be fine. We'll be fine." He whispers and she nods against him but

they avoid each other's eyes. They're both still worried; they just don't want the other to know.

"We'll be fine."